SUMMER

COMPLETE COWBOY

15¢ 20¢ in Canada

WILD WESTERN STORIES

RAINBOW TRAIL

Brand New Novel

By CLIFF CAMPBELL

AMAZING INTRODUCTORY OFFER!

Do You Want Longer Hair?

MAKE THIS EASY 7-DAY TEST...

FULLY GUARANTEED

LONGER HAIR Dresses Better In Latest Styles

* * * THEN TRY THIS

PROVEN EASY SYSTEM ON YOUR HAIR

...Helps Prevent Brittle Ends From Breaking Off!

HERE IS THRILLING NEW HOPE for millions who want their dry, lusterless, unruly, brittle and breaking off hair more lovely ...longer. The Juelene SYSTEM has helped men and women all over the nation to find new happiness and confidence in more beautiful, healthy appearing hair. Yes, hair may get longer—the scalp and hair condition being otherwise normal—if the breaking-off process of dry, brittle ends can be retarded. That's why Juelene is such a natural way to help your hair gain its normal beauty. This wonderful SYSTEM helps relieve hair dryness that is caused by lack of natural oils. It helps soften harsh, brittle ends, thus giving your hair a chance to get longer once the breaking-off and the splitting ends have been curbed. If your hair is dry, rough and hard to keep neat, try the easy Juelene SYSTEM for just 7 days. See if Juelene's tendency to soften harsh, difficult-to-manage hair can help yours to become softer, silkier, more lustrous than it has been before—in just one short week! You may win compliments from both men and women who admire and envy your hair in its new lovely beauty.

TEST JUELENE FOR 7 DAYS

Thrilling Results or MONEY BACK IN FULL!

That's all we ask you to do. Just make the convincing Juelene test for 7 days and see for yourself if your brittle, splitting hair can be softened, made more sparkling and lovely. Your mirror will tell you the thrilling results and so will your friends! If you aren't absolutely amazed with the glistening sheen ... if you aren't delighted with the ease in which you can manage your hair, we will refund every cent of your money. What could be fairer? This proves to you how excellent we think the results will be! So don't wait. Mail the coupon right now. And like thousands of others you may find new beauty, be rightfully proud of your hair. You run no risk because you have absolute guarantee of delightful results or your money back. Send for it now!

* * * MAIL 7-DAY TRIAL COUPON NOW!

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JUEL CO., 1930 Irving Park Road, Dept. A625, Chicago 13, Ill.

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COMPLETE COWBOY

WILD WESTERN STORIES

Cover by H. W. Scott — *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*

Volume 6 — **SUMMER, 1945** — **Number 2**

NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

RAINBOW TRAIL . . . . . **by Cliff Campbell** **10**

Mustang Marshall finds that cunning is sometimes more effective than bullets!

SHORT STORIES

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Funeral O'Neill, and his partner, Ringbone Smith, look into the mystery of a vanishing archaeologist and come up with gun-trouble!

OUTLAW'S COURT . . . . . **By T. W. Ford** **71**

Three men and a woman were brought together that night, to stand trial for a betrayal, back in the near-forgotten past!

SIDEWINDER TRAIL . . . . . **By Archie Joscelyn** **82**

Sometimes innocent-looking objects like beer bottles can add up to a noose for brutal killers!

LOOSE KID PAYS OFF . . . . . **By Leo Hoban** **97**

A maverick kid squares the debt his father owed to society!

Illustrations by Charles Carter and Elton Fax

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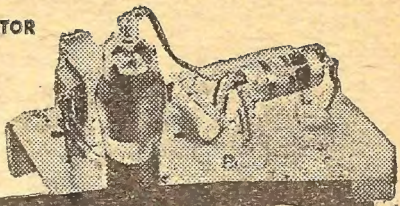

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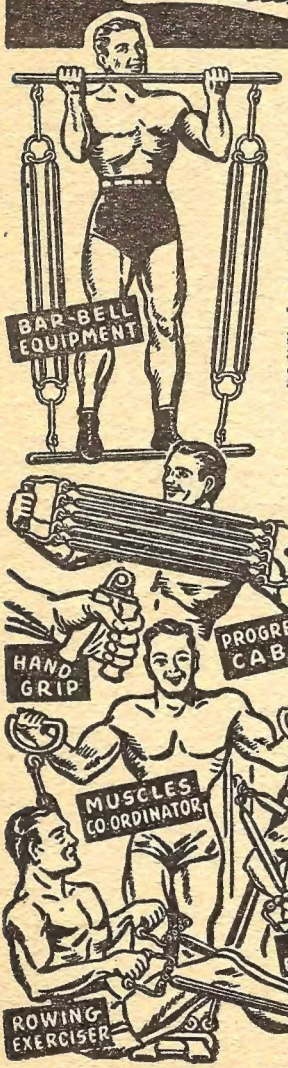

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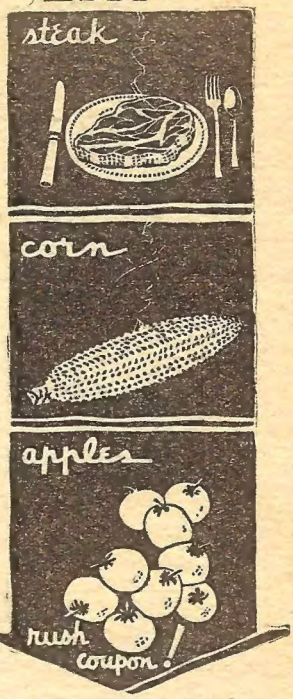

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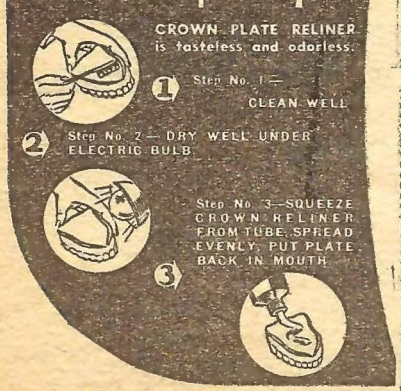
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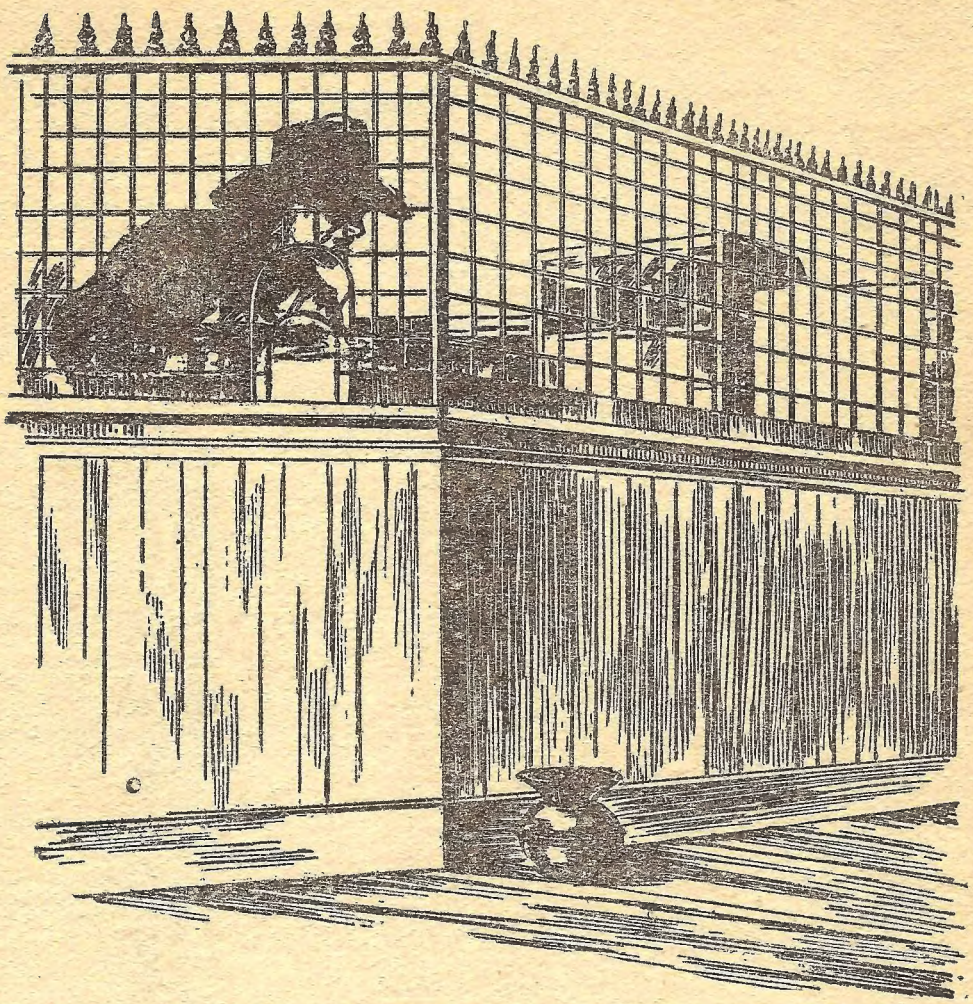
A New "Mustang Marshall" Novel By



RAINBOW TRAIL

By Cliff Campbell

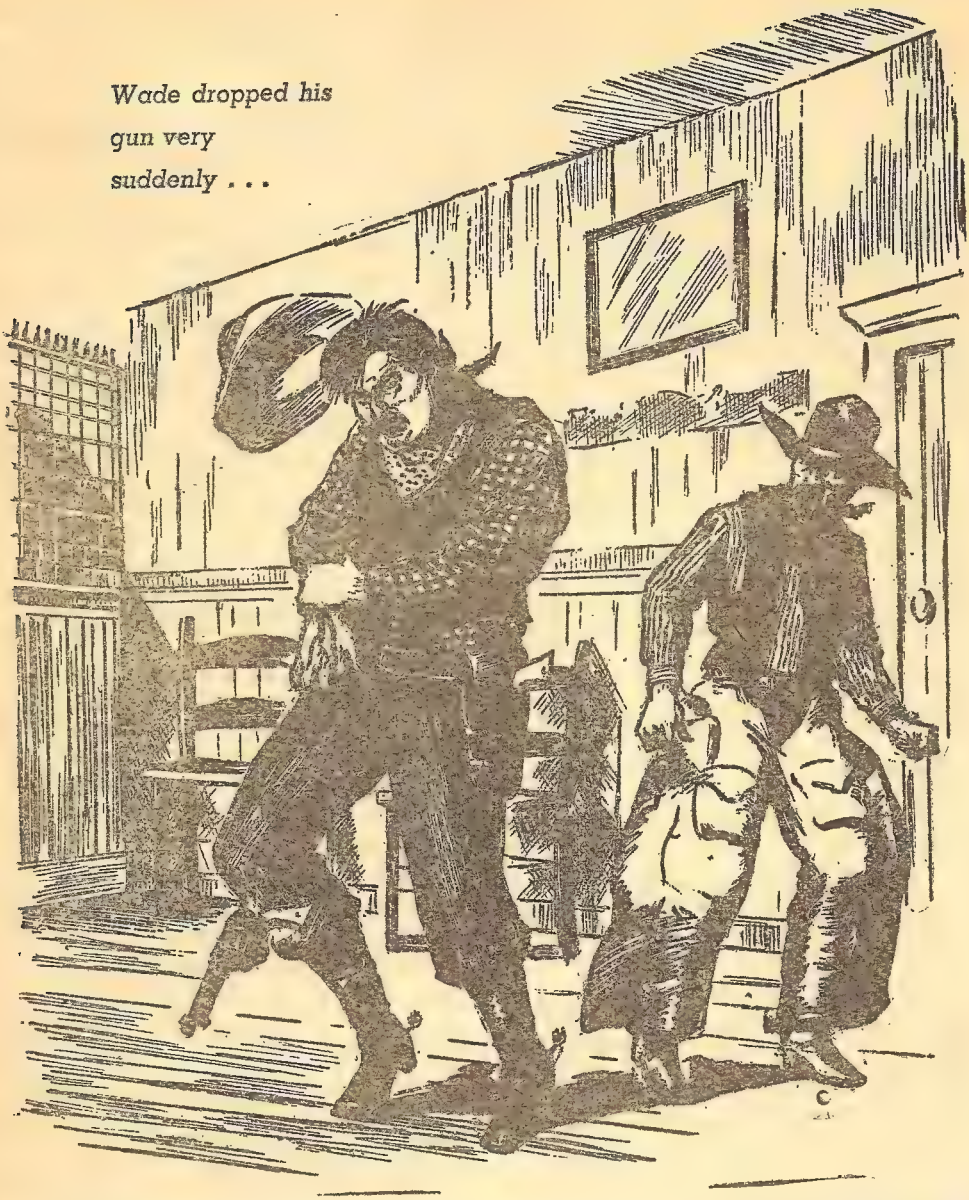
Mustang Marshall *encounters a hidden opponent, whose craft is more deadly than bullets!*

CHAPTER I

The Coming of Marshall

THE TRAIL wound steadily upward through thick, lush grass and multi-hued flowers

The Author of "Utah," etc.



Wade dropped his gun very suddenly . . .

that dotted the steep hillside in a riotous profusion of color. At the top of the hill were white, fleecy clouds, giving one the impression that the sky was resting on the hill.

The big black horse snorted protestingly. . . . he had done more hill climbing this day than any other day that he could recall; now he was tired and winded and almost convinced that it would never end. Astride him, Marshall shifted himself a bit in the saddle.

"I know, I know," he said wearily. "You're plumb wore out an' so am I, but this can't last f'rever, y'know. We're bound t' reach level ground sooner or later, so you might's well shut up an' save your breath an' just keep goin' till we do."

The black voiced an answering and evidently dissatisfied snort but Marshall disregarded it. He looked up suddenly. .the air was surprisingly cooler now, proof that they were nearing the top of the hill. The big horse noticed it and raised his head, too. .he quickened his pace. Then suddenly they were on level ground again.

"There y'are," Marshall said. "Just like I told you."

He sat upright again in the saddle. . .the black's tiredness seemed to disappear and he loped away effortlessly. They swept over the grassy level for some ten, fifteen minutes. . .they had covered a mile when Marshall pulled the black to a halt.

They had come to the end of the level ground. Below them, spreading away at the base of a gentle slope was a sprawling town. Marshall pushed his dust-smudged hat back from his eyes.

"Wa-al, what d'you know!" he muttered in surprised tones. "I woulda been willin' t' bet there wasn't anything b'tween these hills but more hills."

He settled himself deeply in the saddle.

"Go 'head!" he said.

The black went on again, down the grassy incline, then they were trotting onto hard, barren ground that presently became a street. The big horse whinnied but there was no answering hail. . .his hoofs echoed metallically on the ground. There were stores on both sides of the street . . . above one doorway hung a sign whose faded letters formed the word "Eat"; twenty feet beyond it was a double-windowed store with the single legend. . . *"Bank"*. . . daubed on its dirty panes.

Halfway down the street was a two-story high structure, the tallest building in the town. There was a sagging porch in front of it. . .a huge sign that read *'Hotel'* hung between the two middle windows on the upper floor. There were hitching posts and rails at various points along the curb but they were completely unused. Marshall halted the black. He was puzzled and the expression on his bronzed face reflected it.

"Funny," he muttered. He twisted around for a moment, then he settled himself again in the saddle. "Doggone funny, if anyb'dy should ask me. Not a sign o' life anywhere's. Looks like one o' them ghost towns I've heard tell about."

HE STIFFENED instinctively when he heard a door creak open somewhere behind him along the street. . .he turned around presently. From the doorway of the bank a man with a half raised rifle in his hands peered out at him for a moment, then he withdrew his head. The door slammed shut and the jarring noise echoed the length of the street. Marshall frowned.

"Nice feller," he mumbled. "Looks me over fr'm top t' bottom, then he pulls in 'is head without sayin' a word o' greeting."

He wheeled the black and rode slowly down the street, pulled up in front of the bank and dismounted stiffly. He hitched up his pants and trudged across the wooden sidewalk. The black turned his head and followed Marshall with his eyes. The wooden planking that formed the sidewalk was warped and it creaked dismally beneath Marshall's step. He glanced at the word *'Bank'* on the window pane, halted when he reached the closed door. He jerked it impatiently. . .when it refused to open he frowned again and rapped on it sharply.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Open up! Y'got comp'ny!"

There was no response. He gave the door knob a vicious twist.

"Hey!" he yelled a second time.

THE door was suddenly opened. . in the doorway stood the man with the rifle; this time the weapon was levelled. Its muzzle gaped menacingly at Marshall's chest. The man behind the rifle was grey-haired and nervously quick-eyed.

"Howdy," Marshall said curtly. The man did not answer. His finger seemed to tighten around the trigger of the rifle. "What kind uva place is

this, huh? This th' way you us'ally greet strangers 'round these parts?"

"Who. . .who are you?"

"Oh. . .so you have got a tongue, eh? My name's Marshall."

"What d'you want?"

"Somethin' t' eat an' drink an' a place t' sleep."

The rifle was lowered the barest bit.

"You'd better keep goin', Mister," the man said. "This ain't th' safest place f'r anybody t' be at."

There was a light step behind him. . . Marshall's eyes went past him, A girl came forward. She, too, carried a rifle.

"What is it, Tom?" she asked. She avoided Marshall's eyes, looked him over appraisingly, halted her eyes lingeringly on the brace of heavy black Colts that hung low against his lean thighs. "Who is this man?"

"Says his name's Marshall an' that he's lookin' f'r some grub an' a place t'bed down."

Marshall smiled lightly.

"That goes f'r my horse, too," he said.

"Mustang" Marshall

The girl's eyes came up to meet his. Hers were soft and brown but troubled. For a second time she looked down at his holstered guns.

"One o' you mind tellin' me what's goin' around here?" he asked. "What's all th' mystery about?"

"You can put down your rifle, Tom," the girl said.

The grey-haired man backed deeper into the store. The girl came forward to the doorway. For a moment she and Marshall eyed each other. . . presently his eyes ranged past her. Behind her he could see overturned chairs, a smashed table and papers scattered on the floor. He looked surprised but he made no comment.

"We didn't mean to be rude," he heard her say and he looked at her again.

"That's awright," he replied. "Sorry I busted in on you like this, but th' old feller was th' on'y human I saw."

"Yes," she said patiently. "We're the only ones left in Rainbow. Everyone else has gone. I think it would be wise for you to go, too."

"That so? Why?"

"Things are liable to happen around here," she said significantly.

"Fr'm th' looks o' this place," he answered wryly. "I'd say they have happened a'ready."

"We expect them to be even worse."

"You don't say!"

"That's why you'd better go," she concluded.

Marshall hooked his thumbs in his gun belt.

"What's s'pposed t' follow th' tornado or whatever it was that hit here?" he asked.

"Fire," she said simply.

His eyebrows arched.

"Oh, yeah?"

She nodded mutely, wearily.

"Look," he said. "S'ppose you tell me what this bus'ness is all about? Mebbe I c'n do somethin'."

SHE smiled wanely and shook her head.

"I'm afraid there isn't anything anyone can do now."

"I'm still willin' t' try."

She shrugged a slender shoulder.

"I don't suppose there can be any harm in telling you. As you probably noticed, this is a bank. My father owned it. Anyway, we were robbed the other night. The depositors. . . they're cattlemen. . .we-ll, curiously enough the very next morning every one of them appeared and clamored for their money."

"Nice spot f'r your Dad t' be in with all th' dough gone," he said.

Her face clouded.

"Dad tried to explain to them what had happened. He promised to make good the money somehow, however he begged them to give him some time to raise it. They wouldn't listen," she said bitterly. "They accused him of robbing the bank. O-h, they said some perfectly terrible things to Dad."

He nodded grimly.

"They were cattlemen awright," he said understandingly. "They're allus too thick-headed t' listen t' reason. They ain't got 'ny more sense than their steers."

"Dad finally lost his temper," the girl continued. "He ordered them out. There was a fight. Dad was. . .shot."

"That was a tough break. Was he. . hit bad?"

"He's dead," she said simply.

His lips thinned.

"Killin' him off just about killed off their chances o' ever gettin' their money back. But knowin' cattlemen an' how they op'rate, I wouldn't expect them t' figger that out, leastways not right off."

"They didn't look at Dad's death that way. They sent me word that they'd come for their money today."

"They did, eh? An' where are you s'pposed t' get it fr'm?" he demanded.

"I don't think they gave that any thought."

"That all th' message they sent you?"

"Y-es, practically all. Of course, they added a threat to it."

"'Course. I'd expect th'm t' do that. What was th' threat?" he asked.

"If I can't produce the money when they come for it today, they're going to burn Rainbow to the ground."

"Just like that, eh? Is that why everybody hightailed it?"

"Yes," she replied. "But I can't say that I blame them. The Wades are bad, thoroughly and cruelly bad, so it isn't surprising that everyone's afraid of them."

"Everybody 'cept you an' th' old feller. Who are these Wades?" he asked.

"O-h, they own the Bar-O Ranch. It's the biggest spread in the county. The Wade boys, Ed and Jim, are twins, and they're equally bad."

"What about th' law? Don't it hamper their style none?"

"Not in the slightest. The Wades do things around here to suit themselves."

"Yeah, but what about th' Sheriff? He do 'nything 'bout clippin' their wings?"

THE girl's lip curled scornfully. "Sheriff Hodges is their cousin. Actually, he owes his job to them," she explained.

"So that's how it is in Rainbow!"

"Yes."

"Where's this Hodges feller now? Don't tell me he's hightailed it, too?"

"He has! Whenever anything happens, the Sheriff is out of town. We've become quite accustomed to that situation. Of course, when things quiet down, he always returns."

"Y'got some set-up in this town, awright! S-ay, who's th' old feller?"

"Tom? Oh, he's just an old friend. He was a storekeeper here in town but the Wades ruined him. Dad took him in and he's been with us ever since. I don't know what I'd have done without him."

"Uh-huh. Oh, yeah. . .what's your name?"

"It's Grant, Frances Grant. However everyone calls me Fran," she answered. "But you'd better be going now. I shouldn't have kept you here this long."

He wheeled abruptly and marched to the waiting black at the curb. The big horse turned his head and watched him jerk his rifle out of the leather sheath that hung on his saddle below the dangling right stirrup.

"Got a place f'r him?" Marshall asked over his shoulder, nodding toward the idling horse.

Fran's eyes widened.

"You mean you're. . ."

"I' sure am stayin' put in Rainbow," he said with a grin. "I've allus wanted t' work in a bank. Here's just th' chance I've been waitin' for an' I'm doggoned if I don't grab it while th' grabbin's good."

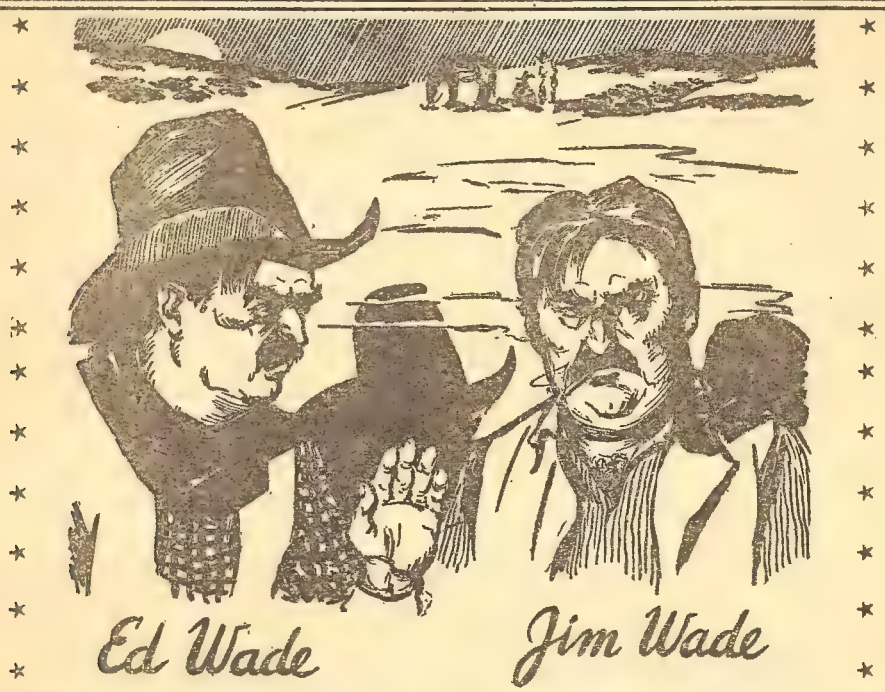
"But. . ."

"No buts about it," he said. He came striding back to the doorway. "You've hired y'self a new teller. Mind if I step inside? Might be a good idea t' kinda get organized t' r'ceive th' customers, y'know!"

* * *

IT WAS late afternoon, a cool, oppressively silent and tensed interlude between day and night. The lengthening shadows had already appeared and draped themselves over the hastily closed-down town. A tiny piece of paper, caught up by a swirling gust of wind, sped wildly and blindly along the gutter. . .when the wind died down, the paper dropped limply, twisted and exhausted, against the curb. Inside the bank, the chairs and the smashed table had been removed. Marshall, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt, lounged idly and impatiently in the open doorway. He looked up quickly when he heard a noise. . .it was the drab "Eat" sign flapping in the breeze on its rusty hinges.

He heard a light step overhead on the roof. . .it was Fran's. He had insisted that she and old Tom move up to the roof for he was certain that there would be some kind of outbreak. . .gun-play he expected, even though he hadn't said so. . .when the Wades arrived. With them up there, he would be better able to cope with the situation, especially if the Wades attacked in numbers. From their posts they could add a helpful rifle fire in the event of a frontal attack.



He stiffened when he heard a distant rumble of horses' hoofs.

"Uh-huh," he said aloud. "Reckon th' Wades are fin'lly comin'."

He stepped back, closed the door, vaulted the low counter and straightened up behind it. The clatter of hoofs swelled. . .he heard a thumping on the roof, a pre-arranged signal to warn him of the Wades' approach. Then iron-shod hoofs filled the street with a metallic thunder. A group of hard-riding horsemen swept past the bank at a full gallop. Dust swirled around them, then over their heads. A moment later two of them came riding back. Marshall saw them pull up at the curb, saw them dismount.

"One o' th'm's bigger'n a bear," he muttered as he watched them saunter toward the door. "Reckon he's one o' th' Wades. Th' other feller's a heap smaller but even more ornery lookin' than th' big one."

HE LEANED back against the wall. The door was flung open and the two men pushed their way in. Marshall straightened up, grinned and waved his hand.

"Howdy, gents," he called. "Glad t' see you. Mind closin' th' door, partner?"

The big man gave him a hard look. . .he and his companion exchanged glances. When the former nodded, the second man kicked the door shut.

"Thanks, partner," Marshall said amiably. "Now, then, gents. . .what c'n I do for you? Talk right up. Don't cost a danged cent t' ask questions. y'know."

The big man frowned, shifted his holster, then he came lumbering up to the counter.

"Where's Fran Grant?" he demanded.

Marshall grinned again.

"Gone, m' friend," he answered. "But don't ask me where. Feller ain't s'pposed t' ask a lady where she's goin', y'know. He's liable t' be told."

He laughed loudly. . .when Wade scowled, Marshall's laugh ceased abruptly. He shook his head sadly.

"Sure beats all hell how some fellers c'n tell a joke an' have everyb'dy listenin', rollin' on th' floor," he said sheepishly. "When I tell 'em, heck, they fall flatter'n a pancake. Wonder if it's th' jokes or just me?"

Wade's lip curled.

"I wonder," he said coldly. He leaned against the counter. "Who'n hell are you?"

Marshall's eyebrows arched in surprise.

"Me?"

"Who d'you think I mean?"

"Couldn't be anyb'dy else but me, could it. . .bein' that I'm th' on'y one b'hind here?"

"Wa-al?"

"Huh?" Oh. . .I'm Marshall. What's your handle, partner?"

"Wade!" the big man snapped. "What are you doin' here?"

Marshall's chest swelled.

"Heck, Mister, I'm president, gen'ral manager, even th' porter," he announced and tapped himself on the chest. "Fact o' th' matter is, partner, I'm what you might call, th' hull danged works. Somethin' I c'n do f'r you? Wanna make a d'posit or somethin'?"

Wade's companion came forward now. He tugged at the big man's sleeve. . .Wade and he moved back from the counter; they conferred in whispers for a moment, then Wade nodded. The other man turned and trudged back to the door.

"Mister," Wade said presently. "S'ppose you show me your bill o' sale or whatever else y' got t' prove you own this place."

MARSHALL rubbed his chin reflectively. He raised his head suddenly. His jaw hung for a moment. . .then he snapped it shut.

"I'll be doggoned!" he said like a man making a sudden and unhappy discovery. "I'll be a lop-eared sonuva-gun if I even thought o' askin' f'r anything b'side a key t' th' place! How d'you like that?"

Wade's lips tightened. His right arm jerked clumsily. . .his gun cleared its holster but before the big man could snap it upward, a big Colt flashed into Marshall's hand and thundered deafeningly. Wade dropped his gun hastily. . .he made a convulsive grab with his left hand, clutched his right wrist tightly. He glowered at Marshall. . .the latter was grim and steely eyed now.

"Awright!" Marshall said through his teeth. "You near th' door! Reach f'r th' ceilin' or I'll blast you apart!"

The man scowled darkly. . .when Marshall's Colt swung toward him in an encompassing circle, his hands climbed upward without further delay.

"An' keep 'em up there, too!" Marshall commanded. He swung himself over the counter. Wade, tight-lipped, and still gripping his shattered wrist, glared at him, however he backed away a bit, watching Marshall warily but making every effort to keep a re-

spectable distance from him. Marshall looked at him.

"Wade," he said shortly. "I've just got this much t' say t' you an' I want you t' r'member it 'cause it goes f'r your brother, too. Fr'm now on stay th' hell outta here. That clear? Th' next time I see that pot-belly o' yourn comin' through that door, I'm gonna start fillin' it full o' lead."

He brushed past the big man, halted briefly to kick Wade's gun against the far wall, then he strode over to the door.

Mike Gallo

"You," he said curtly to the man with the upraised hands. "What's your handle?"

The man's lips tightened.

"Go t' hell!" he snarled.

Marshall struck him squarely in the face. . he reeled drunkenly, fell to his hands and knees.

"Get up!"

Slowly the man came erect again. Blood trickled out of a corner of his mouth.

"Wa-al?" Marshall demanded ruthlessly.

"It's Gort!"

"That's better. Next time don't be so free sendin' other folks where you're headin' for!" Marshall said sharply. "G'wan, th' both o' you. . .get outta here an' stay out!"

GORT obeyed promptly. . .he backed out of the bank, his hands still high over his head; he lowered them when he reached the curb. Wade turned slowly, looked at Marshall and at his gun that lay against the wall. Marshall shook his head significantly and the big man lumbered out. Marshall watched them mount, saw Wade ride away. Gort twisted around in the saddle and motioned vigorously. . .suddenly he spurred his horse and dashed off. Marshall whirled, raced back to the counter threw himself over it. There was a sudden pounding of hoofs, then an ear-splitting thunder of guns. The windows fell in with a deafening crash.

Now, rifle in hand, Marshall arose and came racing out of the bank. He skidded to a stumbling stop at the curb, and half raised his rifle. The last horseman in line, twisting around in his saddle, his gun upraised, caught sight of him and levelled his gun. Marshall's rifle snapped upward. . .he fired twice.

The horseman stiffened, dropped his gun into the gutter. He turned slowly and toppled out of the saddle. He fell heavily, landed on his shoulder and crashed over limply on his face.

CHAPTER II

Rainbow

THE next morning there was a curious and sudden echo of activity in Rainbow, a constant and noisy clatter of hoofs and a squeaking of wagon wheels and brakes as the townspeople returned to their homes and stores. Marshall, standing in the open doorway of the bank, watched them interestedly. He heard a step behind him. . .he turned his head.

"Good morning," Fran said.

"Mornin'," he replied. He moved a bit, made room for her in the doorway. "Looks like a p'rade."

"Yes," she said soberly. "However, it isn't the first return of Rainbow's citizens that I've witnessed. The chances are, this won't be the last."

He made no reply. They were silent for a moment, their eyes on the strange cavalcade that rumbled past them. Both looked up when a small wagon with a canvas top came abreast of the bank. . .the man and the woman on the driver's seat waved as they clattered by.

"Ben West and his wife," Fran said. "They run the hotel down the street."

Now a big man on an equally big horse emerged from between two prairie schooners. The man looked over, caught Fran's eye. . .he smiled, touched the wide brim of his hat, swung his horse into the curb and pulled up.

"Sure grow 'em big out here," Marshall remarked, eyeing the man. "Who's he?"

"Mike Gallo," Fran answered. "He owns the Star Cafe. It's across the street from the hotel."

Gallo dismounted. He brushed some dust from the front of his long black coat, gave his hat brim an adjusting tug, then he came striding up to the doorway.

"Mornin', Miss Fran," he said. He smiled again, revealing small, white, even teeth that flashed all the more noticeably because of his dark skin.

"Good morning, Mike," Fran said. "You came back sooner than usual, didn't you?"

The big man laughed softly.

"S'ppose so," he admitted a bit sheepishly. "Sorry I had t' run out on you, Fran, but you know how it is with me an' th' Wades. I owe th'm a heap an' I don't d'ny it. That's why when anythin' comes up b'tween them an' someb'dy else, I can't take sides against 'em. I'm willin' to admit that if it wasn't f'r them an' f'r th' bus'ness they bring into th' Star, wa-al, th' Star just wouldn't be what it is t'day."

"Of course," Fran replied. Marshall detected a trace of cold scorn in her voice.

"But," Gallo continued. "Long's nuthin' happened to you, an' you're awright, reckon I c'n breathe easier now. This th' feller who made th' Wades eat dirt?"

"This is Marshall."

THE big man nodded to him.

"Glad t' know you," he said. "Glad t' know anyb'dy who'll stand up t' th' Wades."

"You oughta try it y'self sometime," Marshall said quietly. "You're big enough."

Mike grinned sheepishly.

"Yeah, I s'ppose so," he acknowledged. "Still, it allus seems like it takes a stranger t' show you how a thing like that c'n be done. Anyway, soon's I heard what happened, I hot-footed it back."

Marshall grunted.

"You an' a heap more."

"Uh-huh, on'y how they found out about it sure beats me," Gallo said.

"An' who brung you word?" Marshall asked.

The big man's teeth flashed again in a knowing smile.

"O-h, word gets aroun', y'know," he answered. "I've seen you somewhere's, ain't I?"

"Could be. I've been places."

"Yeah, sure, an' I've heard your name b'fore, too. Yo couldn't be th' feller who turned Leadville an' Chenango an' a couple o' them other hellholes inside out an' showed th' polecats there that th' Law was boss. . . could you?"

"I was Sheriff o' Leadville an' a couple o' other places," Marshall said quietly.

"Wa-al," Gallo said, nodding. "I sure wish you were th' Law here, too. Rainbow might be worth livin' in then."

Marshall felt Fran's eyes on his face. . .when he looked down at her, she quickly averted her eyes.

"If I c'n be uv any help, Marshall," Gallo said. "Just you get word t' me."

"Think I'll need 'ny?"

The big man's face grew grim.

"If I know th' Wades like I figger I do," he answered, "You'll need more'n just help fr'm me."

"That so?"

Gallo nodded.

"Nob'dy c'n ever kick them aroun' an' get away with it. Mebbe you're th' exception. But till you prove it to th'm, they'll do everythin' they c'n t' get you. 'Course, that's just th' way I got th'm figgered out. I'm willin' to admit they ain't monkeyed aroun' with a real gun thrower b'fore, an' that you're li'ble t' pin their ears back like all get-out. But all th' same, Mister, if I was you, I'd sure take it easy an' I'd sure watch m' step."

"Thanks," Marshall said. "I'll bear that in mind."

Gallo nodded.

"Wa-al, I better get goin' again. Got t' get things org'nized f'r bus'ness, y'know. Even one day makes a heap uva diff'rence. Be seein' you, Marshall. You, too, Fran."

HE TURNED on his heel and retraced his steps to the curb; mounted and rode slowly up the street. Fran turned and went inside. . Marshall followed her. He closed the door behind him with a backward thrust of his left leg. Fran halted, turned and looked up at him.

"Marshall," she began.

He looked down at her, hooked his thumbs in his gun belt.

"Yeah?"

"You've been wonderfully kind to me," she said, "and brave. But I want you to leave Rainbow."

He grinned easily, boyishly.

"Tired o' havin' me aroun' a'ready?"

"No," she said gravely.

"'Fraid th' Wades'll do things t' me?"

"They're too many for one man to stand off. It isn't fair to you and I don't want anything to happen to you. The bank isn't worth your life and I won't stand by and let you risk your life for it," she concluded.

"I've fought against bigger odds an' f'r things that weren't half as important," he answered.

"I want you to leave Rainbow," she repeated. "Today. Now."

"An' if I don't?"

"Please. . ."

He shook his head.

"F'rget about th' bank an' everything else, Fran. I'm stayin' on in Rainbow b'cause I want to. It's my job an' that's that."

"I. . .I don't understand."

"S'ppose you don't try to, huh?"

"Then you won't go?"

He shook his head again.

"No," he said with finality. "If I work f'r you, swell. If I don't, I'll just hafta go find me somethin' else t' do t' keep me here."

* * *

Marshall rode slowly out of town. Minutes later when he topped a rise he twisted around in the saddle and looked back. Below him he could see Rainbow and its busy street. He settled himself in the saddle again, and nudged the black with his knees. The big horse loped away. . .presently he quickened his pace, and broke into a swift, free-striding run. They swept over the ground in an easterly direction. A rifle cracked suddenly, spitefully, and Marshall threw himself forward instinctively against the black's neck. The big horse whinnied nervously, excitedly. . .Marshall dug his spurs into the black's flanks, swerved him and sent him thundering away.

The rifle roared a second time and the bullet ploughed the earth a dozen feet ahead of them. Again Marshall swerved the plunging horse, whirled him around when they came abreast of a huge boulder, and pulled up behind it. Cautiously Marshall peered out over the sun-scorched top of the boulder. . .he spotted a tiny wisp of gun smoke rising gently above a distant clump of brush.

"Awright, M i s t e r," he gritted. "Long's I know where you're at, reckon it's up t' me t' do somethin' about it."

He backed the black away from the boulder.

"Awright," he said simply. "Let's go!"

HE SPURRED the big horse, sent him flashing away. . . then suddenly he came circling back in a furious clatter of hoofbeats. Twenty feet from the brush he slowed the black, slid out of the saddle and jerked out a big Colt. The black whirled and raced away again.

Marshall raced forward. He fired twice into the brush, side-stepped nimbly to avoid presenting a stationary target for the hidden rifleman, swerved this way, then that. . .he panted to an abrupt halt when there was a sudden stirring behind the brush. A horseman bent low over his mount's neck came plunging out of the brush.

"Why, you lousy. . .!" Marshall yelled.

His Colt thundered protestingly and the horse cried out, stumbled and tripped, hurling his rider over his head. The man struck the ground

heavily, evidence that he was unprepared for the fall. . .he landed on his shoulder and crashed over in a limp, awkward heap of arms and legs. The wounded horse scrambled to his feet, wheeled and jogged away. Marshall, his gun raised and ready for another shot, burst through the brush. He jerked to a stumbling stop.

"Awright, you polecat!" he commanded. "Get up on your hind legs an' reach f'r th' sky!"

There was no movement by the outstretched man, no response. Marshall eyed him warily for a moment, then, with his Colt levelled, he trudged forward, came up directly behind him.

"Awright!" he said again. "Get up!"

Still there was no movement, no acknowledgment of Marshall's command. He frowned. . .he looked about him quickly, guardedly; when he spied the man's rifle lying on the ground a short distance away, he was satisfied. He holstered his gun, bent over the man, turned him over on his back. Marshall's eyes widened. He stared hard. Peeping out from beneath the man's hat brim were blond curls. . he gulped and swallowed, stared hard at a tiny thread of blood that suddenly appeared between the curls and worked its way downward and halted when it reached a curving eyebrow.

"Holy cow!" he muttered. "A girl!"

HE WHIPPED out his bandana, knelt down beside her and gently wiped away the blood. The black came up behind him. . .nudged him, and Marshall looked up. He pocketed his handkerchief, hitched up his pants and bent over the girl again. . .he swept her up into his arms, turned to the black.

"Steady," he said, and got to his feet. He lifted the unconscious girl into the saddle, steadied her with one hand, gripped the reins and swung up behind her. She sank back against him. "Awright."

The black turned his head and looked at the girl. . .he whinnied softly and Marshall nudged him with his knees.

"Go 'head," he commanded.

Slowly they retraced their steps. . . half an hour later they clattered into Rainbow. There were people on the street and they halted their conversations or activities, looked up and eyed him interestedly. Mike Gallo was standing in the open doorway of his place. . .he looked up.

"Marshall!" he called. He came striding to the curb. . .Marshall pulled up.

"Know her?" he asked, nodding toward the limp figure that lay against his chest.

Gallo looked at her sharply. His eyes widened.

"Hey!" he said quickly. "What happened t' her?"

"Know 'er?" Marshall repeated.

"Sure," Gallo answered.

"Awright then. Who is she?"

"Eadie Wade."

Marshall's eyebrows arched.

"Oh, yeah?"

Gallo nodded vigorously.

"Oh, yeah, is right. Mister, you got y'self a heap o' trouble on your hands now if you had 'nything t' do with whatever happened t' her."

"That so? Th' Wades use her in their bus'ness?"

Gallo's face darkened.

"Look, Marshall. . .do me a favor an' y'self. Lemme have Eadie an' you get th' hell outta Rainbow fast's that horse o' yourn c'n carry you."

"No, thanks. I'll hang on to 'er f'r now anyway."

Marshall nudged the black. . .the big horse clattered away. In another minute they halted again, this time in front of the bank. Marshall slipped out of the saddle. . .gently he lowered the girl, settled her in his arms, turned and trudged across the sidewalk. The door opened and Fran appeared. Marshall grinned at her.

"Brung you a boarder," he said lightly. "Know 'er?"

Fran held the door wide. Marshall halted on the threshhold. Fran peered hard at the Wade girl.

"Why, that's Edith Wade," she said quickly.

"That's what Gallo said."

"But. . ."

"She took a nasty spill offa her horse," Marshall said. "I'll tell 'bout it later on. Right now th' best thing we c'n do f'r 'er is t' get 'er t' bed."

FRAN turned without a word. Marshall, shifting the unconscious girl in his arms, followed at Fran's heels. They went through a door at the very rear of the bank, down a narrow length of hallway, then into a small room at the far end of it. Fran turned to him.

"Put her down on the bed," she said.

Marshall obeyed. Fran pushed past him, bent over the girl.

"Edith!" she said.

When there was no response, she went quickly to a washstand in the corner of the room. She opened a drawer, whipped out a towel, dipped one end of it into the water, turned and came back to the bed. Again she bent over the Wade girl. Gently she bathed her face and wrists. Half a dozen times she came erect, went back to the water basin and dampened the towel; it was probably fifteen minutes later when Edith Wade stirred.

"Thank goodness!" Fran said. She put down the towel, seated herself on the edge of the bed, took Edith's hands in hers. "Edith!"

The girl's eyelids flickered. . . presently her eyes opened.

"Feel better now?" Fran asked.

Edith's eyes ranged past her. She looked at Marshall for a moment. . . she flushed suddenly and hastily, awkwardly, averted her eyes. Marshall, watching her, frowned; he straightened up, hitched up his belt, shifted his holsters a bit.

"Don't s'ppose you need me in here any more," he said. He turned, trudged to the door, halted in the doorway and looked back. "Fran."

She turned and looked at him.

"You better tell 'er that she's damned lucky t' be where she is right now 'stead o' out in th' brush with a bullet in 'er," he said coldly. There was anger in his voice and eyes. "Folks who go 'round takin' pot shots at other folks are doggoned lucky when they don't get plugged instead. If she aims t' stay alive, she better not push 'er luck too far. There's a limit t' everything, 'specially luck."

He jerked at his hat brim viciously.

"There's another thing you might tell 'her, too," he added presently. Fran looked at him quietly, patiently. "Tell 'er t' leave killin's to 'er brothers. They're s'pposed t' be good at th'm, 'specially when th' other feller ain't lookin'. As f'r her, she can't shoot straight, even when she's got a bead on a feller."

HE STORMED out, pulled the door shut behind him. He was tight-lipped when he came out of the bank. Mike Gallo, sober-faced, came striding up to him. Marshall's frown reflected his annoyance with the man.

"Oh," he grunted. "So it's you again, eh?"

"She awright?" Gallo asked anxiously.

"Who's she?"

"Eadie, o' course. Who d'you think I'm askin' about?"

"O-h, her," Marshall grunted. "Yeah, she's awright. Got 'erself a bump on 'er head, but that's about all. How come you're so all-fired worried about 'er?"

"I'm on'y thinkin' o' you," Gallo answered.

Marshall's lip curled.

"Don't bother y'self about me, Mister," he said coldly. "I don't need 'nybody t' ride herd over me, leastways, not yet, anyway. An' when I do, d'pend on it, I won't ask you t' do it."

Gallo shrugged a thick shoulder.

"Awright," he said with finality. "If that's th' way you feel about it, reckon it's awright with me. Eadie ready t' go home yet?"

Marshall's lips thinned into a straight line.

"No!" he snapped. "But when she is, I'll see to it that she gets there awright. I'm still able t' get about by m'self, so's my horse. B'tween us we'll handle her awright."

Gallo eyed him for a moment, then he smiled.

"'Course," he said. "So long."

He turned and marched off. Marshall followed him with his eyes until the big man turned into the Star Cafe.

"I don't like that feller," he said half aloud. "Some day he's gonna get under my feet an' I'm just natur'lly gonna walk all over 'im!"

CHAPTER III

Strange Companions

IT WAS evening when Marshall and Edith Wade. . .both of them sitting awkwardly and stiffly erect astride the big black. . .rode slowly eastward over the night-darkened range.

From time to time the black turned his head and looked up at them curiously. . .he seemed unable to understand the silence between them. He whinnied once, twice, hopefully, but when there was no acknowledgment nor response from Marshall, not even his usual reassuring pat on the black's neck, the big horse lapsed into silence too. The range was quiet, its heavy silence pierced only occasionally by the creaking of the saddle or the stirrups.

It was now more than an hour since they had left Rainbow, yet in all that time neither of them had uttered a single word. Each sat stiffly erect to avoid touching the other, an exacting if not a difficult feat for two people astride the same horse. A chill wind swept over them suddenly and the girl in her cotton dress and equally lightweight jacket that Fran had insisted upon her taking reacted to it instantly. . .she bowed her head and drew in her arms close against her body.

"Want my blanket aroun' you?" Marshall asked.

"No!" she answered without raising her head.

"Ain't 'ny sense freezin', y'know," he continued calmly. "Not when you don't hafta."

"I'm quite warm, thank you," she said stiffly.

"Awright," he said with an unconscious shrug of his shoulder. "Suit y'self."

He leaned forward suddenly and snapped her jacket collar upward to shield her neck. She did not remonstrate with him this time. . .neither did she voice an objection. The wind swirled about for another minute, then just as suddenly as it had burst upon them, it raced away into the night. Edith raised her head, relaxed a bit with an audible sigh. The black stumbled over a half-buried rock, tripped clumsily and went down to his knees. . .Marshall's arm shot out instantly, gripped the girl securely for a moment, but only for that moment. She clutched the saddle-horn frantically. . .the black came erect again in that brief space of time and the girl pushed Marshall's arm away.

"I was on'y tryin' t' save you fr'm takin' another spill," he said coldly. "But don't worry, I won't bother m'self again, not even if it looks like you're gonna break y' neck!"

She did not reply. He moved back a bit in the saddle, tightened his grip on the reins.

"Stubborn an' nasty an' plumb ornery," he muttered half aloud. "I'm doggoned sorry I didn't stay put an' let you go home by y'self."

"Why didn't you?" she demanded.

"B'cause I'm just a danged fool!" he said loudly.

"That's quite evident," she said curtly.

HIS LIPS tightened. The moon disappeared now behind a cloud and the hushed range was frighteningly dark. Fantastically formed shadows darted here and there. . . some of them seemed to arise directly in their path, flitted past them so closely that once or twice the black cried out and jerked to an abrupt halt that almost jolted the girl out of the saddle. Marshall made no attempt to help her. . .he sat perfectly still and waited for her to steady herself, then he made the black go on again. The wind returned presently and dust and vagrant leaves swirled about them wildly. Marshall glanced skyward.

"Storm comin'," he told himself. He nudged the big horse with his knees. "Go on."

The black quickened his pace but there was no lessening of the wind nor eluding it. It hovered over them persistently. Marshall whipped up his own jacket collar. He halted the

black and dismounted, unstrapped his blanket and swung up again into the saddle. Without a word he opened the blanket and draped it over the girl's shoulders.

"Awright," he said to the black. "Go 'head!"

Through the dark night they rode, a mile, then another and finally the storm broke upon them. It was a light but cold drizzle at first, then a deepening of the rain and finally a furious, drenching downpour.

"Hey!" he yelled and nudged the girl. "Know o' any place aroun' here where we c'n get shelter?"

She turned her head.

"We should be near an old line-rider's shack," she replied.

"Yeah? How near?"

"O-h, it can't be very far now."

He spurred the black and the big horse broke into a swift gallop.

"There it is!" the girl cried suddenly.

She pushed the blanket away and pointed. . .Marshall's eyes followed her finger. He jerked the reins, swerved the black. . .in another minute they pulled up in front of a darkened shack. Marshall slid out of the saddle. He turned and held out his arms to the girl.

"Come on," he said briefly.

When she seemed to hesitate, he stepped closer and whipped away the blanket and lifted her out of the saddle and put her down on the wet ground. He turned on his heel and went swiftly to the shack door. He tried the knob. . .when it failed to open he muttered something under his breath, stepped back and crashed into the door. It flew open, collided with something inside the shack. He stepped over the threshhold, disappeared in the darkness.

"Awright!" she heard him call presently. "You c'n come in now!"

SHE HALTED again in the open doorway. Suddenly a tiny yellow light flared and flamed. There was a crude, makeshift table in the middle of the shack. . .Marshall, a lighted match in one hand, was bent over a lamp that stood atop the table. The lamp flamed with a dazzling brightness.

"Swell," he said and straightened up.

He hitched up his gun belt and strode past her, went outside again. She heard his voice, heard the horse whinny. . .it was several minutes later when Marshall returned. He closed the door with a backward thrust of his foot, handed her the blanket.

"Use it," he said. "It ain't wet all th' way through."

He brushed past her again. . .there were several upended boxes in a far corner of the shack and he brought one forward, placed it near the table.

"Sit down," he said and turned away again.

He was hunting for something now. . .she followed him with her eyes, finally saw him hold up an empty pail. He smashed a couple of the boxes with the butt of a big Colt, broke the wood across his knee and filled the pail with it. He struck another match. . .he placed the pail close by on the floor, stepped back and leaned against the far wall; soon a flame crackled in the pail and he nodded to himself.

"Reckon that's about all I c'n do f'r you t'night," he said, turning toward her. "Sorry I can't rustle up some grub, or at least some hot coffee. You'll just hafta do without it 'till you get home again."

She sat down on the box, draped the blanket around her. He placed another of the boxes against the wall for himself, seated himself upon it. They were silent again, their eyes focused on the bright, warming fire in the pail. The rain thudded on the roof, beat against the walls and the door. The girl drew the blanket closer. Presently she closed her eyes.

* * *

IT WAS early the next morning a clear, warm, sunny morning. . .when Marshall rode slowly into Rainbow and pulled up in front of the bank. He swung himself out

of the saddle, turned his head when he heard the door open. Fran was framed in the doorway.

"Hi!" he called cheerily.

"Hi, yourself!" she replied.

He came striding up to the door. . . her eyes ranged over him, probed his face.

"What's th' matter?" he asked, halting in front of her. He pushed his hat back from his eyes, hooked his thumbs in his belt. "Your eyes are red. You been cryin' or somethin'?"

She shook her head, smiled fleetingly.

"I didn't sleep very well," she answered and quickly averted her eyes.

"Oh, he said. He looked at her sharply. "What kept you awake? Worryin' 'bout me an' why I didn't get back?"

"Of course not! You're free to come and go as you please. Besides that, you're a full-grown man."

"Uh-huh, on'y you were worried, weren't you?"

"We-ll, when it got to be midnight. . . ."

"You had it all figgered out that th' Wades'd finished me off. Fact o' th' matter is, Fran, I didn't see either o' th'm or any o' their hired hands. When we reached th' Bar-O it was just after sun-up and. . . ."

She looked up at him quickly.

"Sun-up?" she repeated.

"Uh-huh. When that storm busted loose on us, we hadda find some place t' duck into, an' lucky f'r us we run into some ol' line-rider's shack an' spent th' night there. Good thing Eadie knew where it was. I'da never found it by m'self in all that storm an' darkness. Anyway, th' storm let up somewhere's b'fore dawn an' we got goin' again. When we hit th' Bar-O. . . ."

"I don't suppose you've had any breakfast," Fran interrupted. "The coffee's still hot and you'll find muffins in the bread-box. Do you mind helping yourself while I attend to some other things?"

She turned on her heel and went back inside. He stared at her for a moment, followed her slim, swift-walking figure with his puzzled eyes until she disappeared from sight. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Now what d'you s'ppose got into her?" he muttered. "Just get started tellin' 'er 'bout last night an' she plumb freezes up an' hightails it."

He heard an approaching step on the sidewalk behind him. . . he turned as old Tom came across the street.

"Mornin', ol' timer," Marshall said.

The old man halted beside him.

"Mornin'. Fran know you're back?"

"Yeah, sure. I was just talkin' to 'er."

"She was sure worried 'bout you last night. Wouldn't turn in, no matter what I tol' 'er. She just kept pacin' up an' down, turnin' first t' th' window an' listenin' there f'r a spell, then openin' th' door an' peerin' out. Fin'lly. . . o-h, reckon it was somewhere's 'round three o'clock, she sat down near th' window an' dozed off."

"Heck, there wasn't any call f'r any o' that! I've been out all night b'fore. B'sides, I c'n take care o' m'self, b'lieve me."

"Yeah, I s'ppose you c'n. But women c'n get th' dangedest, funniest ideas, y'know, an' when they do, they c'n build 'em up 'till they almost lose 'em in th' clouds."

"So I've heard tell," Marshall commented.

"B'sides," the old man continued, then he paused abruptly.

"Yeah? What were you gonna say?"

"Marshall, somethin' tells me that Fran's taken more'n just a shine to you. Y'know, when a girl starts stayin' up nights worryin' 'bout a feller, an' when she walks aroun' th' house not seein' where she's goin', brother, she's. . . ."

"Hold it, partner," Marshall said quickly. "Ain't you readin' th' signs all wrong?"

Tom grinned toothlessly.

"Mister, I've had six sisters an' all o' th'm got th'mselves husbands. B'sides that, I've had two wives in my time, so doggone it, I oughta know what they're up to when I see 'em

moonin' around like Fran's been doin'. All I gotta say t' you is this . . . if you ain't th' marryin' kind, partner, I'd kinda s'ggest that you climb back up on that horse o' yourn an' start goin' places, but fast!"

* * *

MARSHALL sauntered into the Star Cafe, halted when he came to the bar and leaned on it. . . Mike Gallo came along presently and stopped beside him.

"Evenin', Marshall."

'O-h. . . h'llo."

The big man turned his head for a moment, looked anxiously toward the door.

"S'matter?" Marshall asked, watching him.

Gallo turned to him. His face was grim.

"I understan' th' Sheriff's noseyin' aroun' town with a couple o' his deputies an' that they're kinda anxious t' meet up with you," he said in a low voice.

Marshall's eyebrows arched.

'That so?"

"Yeah."

"An' what d'they wanna talk t' me about?"

"Th' warrant th' Sheriff's totin' aroun' says t' lock you up f'r murder."

"That's mighty interestin'. Who's th' late lamented?" Marshall asked.

A bartender, a short, pudgy man with a glistening bald-head, a much too long and soiled apron tied around his waist and a damp, soggy towel slung over his arm, appeared behind the bar. He eyed Marshall.

"Awright, Mister,' he said after a moment's patient wait. "What'll it be?"

Gallo gave him an icy stare.

"Beat it," he said curtly. "We're talkin'."

"Y'mean you are," Marshall said quickly. "An' since I'm doin' th' listenin', reckon I c'n handle a drink at th' same time. Whiskey, bartender."

The latter shrugged his shoulder . . . finally, he placed a half-filled, uncorked bottle in front of Marshall, followed it with a glass; after a moment's hesitation he placed another glass on the bar at Gallo's elbow. Marshall poured himself a drink, turned to Gallo.

"How 'bout you?" he asked.

Gallo shook his head and Marshall grinned lightly.

"It's your own stuff," he said dryly. "You oughta know better'n anybody else if it's worth drinkin'."

"O-h, it's awright," the big man said quickly. "It's. . . it's just that I ain't drinkin'."

Marshall lifted his glass, drained it at a swallow. . . Gallo's hand shot out, gripped Marshall's arm.

"Hodges!" he said out of a corner of his mouth. "Watch y'self!"

He straightened up, patted Marshall on the back and turned away.

"Be seein' you," he called lightly over his shoulder.

Marshall turned quickly.

"Hey!" he called loudly. "Who was that polecat I'm s'pposed to've killed off?"

"Curly Bendix," a surly voice said behind him. The muzzle of a gun collided with his spine and he stiffened. "Put down that glass, Mister, an' turn aroun' with your hands high!"

CHAPTER IV

The Tricks of the Trade

MARSHALL, HIS hands half raised, turned slowly. In front of him stood a bulky, scowling man whose leveled gun gaped at Marshall's chest. . . behind him were his deputies, two men with silver stars pinned to their shirt fronts and who eyed Marshall interestedly.

"You're under arrest f'r th' murder o' Curly Bendix," Sheriff Hodges said briefly.

Marshall smiled coldly.

"Never heard o' him," he said calmly. "Who dreamed him up? Th' Wades?"

Hodges bristled with a great show of indignation.

"Nob'dy dreamed him up!" he retorted angrily. "Nob'dy had to! He was real, awright, an' plenty healthy

too, leastways 'till you plugged him. As f'r th' Wades, they had nuthin' t' do with this a-tall. Runnin' you down was my idea, see?"

"If you say so."

"Awright then!" the Sheriff sputtered. "I'm th' law in Rainbow an' nob'dy else. Get that straight!"

"It's awright with me. I s'ppose you got y'self fixed up with a warr'nt an' that it's all legal-like like th' law says it has t' be?"

Sheriff Hodges grinned, then he laughed heartily.

"Oh, sure!"

"Reckon then you won't mind showin' me th' warr'nt?"

Hodges' eyes glinted, belying his laugh.

"'Course not!" he answered readily. His thick fingers tightened around the butt of his gun. "Take a good look at it, Mister. It's starin' straight at you. Th' Gov'nor, th' S'preme Court an' everythin' else all rolled up into one Colt!"

Marshall did not reply.

"Take his guns, Boys!" Hodges commanded. His two deputies looked at him, then at Marshall. "Go 'head, Pete, Sully!"

The man named Pete hitched up his pants and came forward. . . Sully contented himself by simply moving closer to Marshall, however he made no attempt to assist his mate in disarming the black clad man. Pete halted directly in front of Marshall and reached for the latter's gun butts.

MARSHALL grabbed him suddenly. . . Pete was taken completely by surprise, hence he offered no resistance. With a mighty surge of strength Marshall hurled him away, sent him plunging wildly toward Hodges. Sully, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, stepped forward. . Pete came careening into him and both collided heavily and stumbled backward, trampling the equally unprepared and surprised Hodges. The Sheriff, kicked painfully by one man and trampled on by the other, cried out and when an elbow was driven into the pit of his ample stomach, he gasped and dropped his gun. Pete, stumbling awkwardly when Hodges shoved him away, bent down to pick up the gun. . . instead he kicked it away.

"Doggone you, Pete!" Hodges bellowed. "Doggone your clumsy hide! I oughta. . . . !"

"H o l d it!" Marshall snapped. "Come on, th' three o' you. . . hoist 'em an' hoist ' em high!"

The lawmen turned and stared hard. There was a big black Colt in Marshall's right hand and the muzzle yawned at them hungrily and ominously. Slowly their hands climbed upward. Hodges, red-faced, was panting; his deputies were equally red-faced and both appeared dazed by what had happened. Marshall's lip curled scornfully.

"You're a fine c'llection o' lawm'n, awright," he said coldly. "Th' three o' you couldn't catch a cold.'

Hodges shifted his bulk from one leg to the other.

"You," Marshall said, looking squarely at the Sheriff. "This Bendix maverick I'm accused o' killin'. .who was he?"

The Sheriff scowled.

"One o' th' Wades' riders," he grumbled.

"Uh-huh. An' where was I s'pposed to've killed 'em?"

"Right down th' street."

Marshall looked up quickly.

"Oh, I think I get it now," he said. "I r'member some feller on a horse. .it was after I threw Wade an' Gore outta th' bank. .anyway, this feller was ridin' down th' street. He turned aroun' and threw down on me on'y I shot first. So that was th' Curly Bendix you've been yappin' about. . right?"

Hodges averted his eyes.

"Yeah," he mumbled. "On'y that ain't th' way I heard it told."

"Mebbe not, but that's th' way it happened."

Hodges mumbled again, indistinctly, and Marshall glared at him. The big Colt came up a bit higher.

"You fellers get th' hell outta here," Marshall said gruffly. "What's more, if you aim t' go on livin', take a tip fr'm me an' steer clear o' me.

I'm liable t' f'rget m'self next time I run into you an' start blastin' away 'stead o' fellin' sorry for you. G'wan . .get goin'."

Hodges turned slowly. .Pete bumped into him and when the Sheriff jerked around and glared at him, Pete backed away hastily. Slowly and carefully, giving one another ample room so as to avoid further crowding and trampling, the trio filed out of the place.

Marshall turned, halted when he spied Hodges' gun lying just beyond him. .he strode over to it, edged it away from the bar, drew back his foot and kicked viciously. The gun, caught squarely by Marshall's booted toe, spun toward the open doorway. It sailed over the threshold, rose just a bit higher as it cleared the narrow sidewalk, then it dipped sharply and dropped limply into the gutter.

MARSHALL holstered his gun. Someone tapped him on the shoulder. .it was Mike Gallo.

"S-ay," Mike said with a relaxed grin. "That was awright th' way you handled them three fellers. You made 'em look silly."

"There are tricks in every trade," Marshall answered. "Even in how t' arrest a feller an' get away with it."

"Yeah, I s'ppose that's so," Gallo acknowledged. He grinned again, looked toward the bar. "Think I c'n stand a drink now. How 'bout joinin' me?"

"Awright."

They leaned over the bar. .the pudgy man appeared presently.

"Drinkin', Gents?" he asked.

Gallo scowled darkly.

"Yeah," he snapped. "On'y none o' that belly wash this time. Trot out some o' my special stuff."

The bartender looked at him questioningly.

"Huh? Where d' you keep it, Boss?"

"Don't gimme any o' that innocent stuff," Gallo said gruffly. "You know well's I do where th' stuff is. You've had more uv it 'n I have."

"Aw, now, wait a minute, Boss. . ."

"You heard me! Seems like every time I turn m' back, you're gone. Th' next time I see you, you're outta th' back room. No wonder th' stuff's dwindlin' so fast. G'wan. . . go get us a bottle uv it an' no back talk!"

* * *

Marshall strode briskly along the darkened street toward the bank. Suddenly a shot rang out. . . he froze in his tracks, his hands dangling crablike just above the jutting butts of his guns. A man with a Colt clutched in his upraised hand staggered drunkenly out of a nearby alley. Marshall eyed him carefully. When the man came abreast of him, he fired again, skyward.

"H'ray!" he yelled.

Marshall, turning, watched the man for another minute, then he went on again. The man halted, straightened up, wheeled and leveled his gun and fired. The bullet whined past Marshall's head. . . he whirled around instantly, crouching, a readied Colt gripped tightly in his hand. The man who had fired at him wheeled like a flash and fled. . . he swerved suddenly and plunged into a darkened alley and disappeared. Marshall dashed after him. . . he came thundering up to the entrance to the alley, skidded to a stop. He shook his head. Pursuit, he realized, would be nothing more than wasted effort. The man, he decided, had doubtless planned his escape route beforehand, and now, in the darkness and in the depths of unfamiliar alleys he would easily outdistance Marshall. He holstered his gun.

"Damn," he muttered. "I'd sure liked t' have caught up with that polecat. I'da kicked 'is teeth out!"

He turned on his heel and trudged away.

"Reckon I'd better start gettin' used t' havin' fellers take pot shots at me," he muttered presently. "Th' Wades will try every trick in th' book an' then some t' get me."

He hitched up his belt.

"I'll just have t' keep one step ahead o' th'm," he said with finality.

HE GAVE his gun belt another hitching-up. He glanced across the street. . . a store directly opposite was suddenly plunged into darkness. As he moved alertly, a rifle cracked ominously. He threw himself sideways. . . he heard a bullet whine past, heard it splinter the framework of a door just behind him. His guns flashed into his hands and he plunged across the street. He thought he detected a shadowy movement somewhere within the store. . . as he came closer to it he saw that it was vacant.

The indistinguishable shadow moved again and Marshall's guns leaped upward and flamed and belched with a thunderous roar. A window fell in with a deafening, shattering crash. He headed for the door, planning to smash it in. . . midway he swerved and dashed toward an alley that ran alongside. He came plunging into it. . . he caught a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy, running figure at the far end of the alley and he fired twice, two lightning shots that blended into a single ear-splitting report. The shadow stopped, dissolved into a man who staggered, tottered, gasped and suddenly crumpled up.

"Reckon that's that," Marshall said half aloud. "That kinda squares things b'tween me an' th' Wades, leastways f'r t'night, anyway. One feller got away an' one didn't. That makes it 'n even count an' I'm satisfied."

He shoved his guns into their holsters, turned and tramped across the street. A minute later he reached the bank, found the door unlocked and went in, bolted the door behind him. He heard a quick step and looked up. Fran was standing in the connecting doorway.

"Oh," he said lightly. "How come th' door wasn't locked? An' how come you ain't turned in yet?"

He came sauntering forward.

"I heard some shooting," she said quietly.

He grinned boyishly.

"Come t' think uv it," he replied, "I did, too."

"Did you do any of the shooting?"

He laughed softly.

"Some of it," he said casually. Her anxious eyes probed his face. "One feller put on like he was drunk an' when he got past me, th' son-uva-gun took a shot at me. He got away, run like a thief down some dark alley an' left me high an' dry."

"One fellow?" she echoed. "You mean there was a second attempt to shoot you, too?"

He nodded grimly.

"Yeah, right across th' street," he answered. "There was a feller with a rifle planted there in 'n empty store. He's ready f'r a real plantin' now. I got him."

SHE WAS silent for a moment.

"Now don't you go worryin' about me," he said. "I c'n take care o' myself."

"Marshall," she began presently. "Won't you please listen to reason and leave Rainbow while you can? While you're still able to?"

"You don't understand, Fran. . . "

She gestured impatiently.

"I know, Marshall," she said quickly, interrupting him. "You've a job to do here."

"That's right."

"But what kind of a job is it that you must subject yourself to cowardly attacks?" she demanded. "I don't understand it."

"Look, Fran. . . s'ppose we just f'rget th' hull thing, huh? Nuthin's happened to me an' nuthin's goin' to."

She was silent. . . but after a brief minute she looked up at him again.

"Marshall," she began.

"Yeah?"

"Marshall, if I offered to go with you, would you leave Rainbow?"

"Wa-al, now. . . "

"Would you?" she asked again.

Their eyes met. . . they looked at each other steadily, unwaveringly.

"You're a swell girl, Fran," he said slowly.

"You'll do it?"

He hitched up his belt again, drew a deep breath, faced her again.

"No, Fran," he said quietly. "I wouldn't. I couldn't."

She turned and walked swiftly away.

CHAPTER V

The Bar-O

ED AND JIM WADE sat quietly at the kitchen table as Edith finished drying the breakfast dishes. They followed her every move with their eyes, watched as she hung the wet towel on the bar above the sink, watched too as she put away the dishes.

"Eadie," Ed said finally. She turned and looked at him. "I sure wish you'd a plugged that feller Marshall when you had th' chance to."

"Me, too!" Jim said and thumped the table with his big hand.

"If you'da got th' skunk," Ed continued, "we woulda been awright by now. We'da had our dough outta th' bank an' we'd be sittin' pretty."

Jim nodded vigorously.

"That's right," he said gravely. "We sure woulda!"

Ed turned his head, gave Jim a cold stare.

"You wanna tell this, or am I gonna?" he demanded. "Where was I?"

"You were talkin' about our dough."

"Oh, yeah! Y'know, Eadie, we had Fran right where we wanted 'er."

"Uh-huh," Jim said with another vigorous nod of his head. "She was plumb scared t' death. She was all set t' blab 'er guts out."

Ed glared at him and Jim wilted.

"Look, Jim," Ed said curtly. "There never was no story that needed two t' tell it. If you can't keep quiet 'till I'm done talkin', you go ahead an tell it an' I'll shut up. But if I'm gonna tell it, you shut up an' stay shut!"

Jim averted his eyes. . . he sank back in his chair.

"Thanks," Ed said with a grin. "Like I was gonna say, Eadie, Fran on'y needed one push outta us an' she'da led us right t' th' spot where 'er ol' man'd buried th' dough he stole fr'm th' bank. But right then Marshall come along an' that was that. He saved Fran's hide an' th' dough, too."

Jim raised his head. . . Ed looked at him questioningly.

"'Smatter? I f'rget somethin'?"

Jim shrugged his shoulder.

"Don't ask me," he replied. "This is your story, ain't it?"

ED SCOWLED darkly, clamped his jaws shut and sat back in his chair. Jim laughed softly.

"What he's tryin' t' lead up to, Eadie," he said smoothly, "an' flounderin' aroun' like a drownin' steer instead, is that we ain't worryin' b'cause our dough's gone. It's on account o' you an' your dough. Y'see Eadie, we're men an' men y'know, c'n allus get along, dough or no dough. But it's diff'rent, heaps diff'rent, b'lieve me, an' tougher, too, when it happens t' be a girl who ain't got 'ny dough out here."

"Tough ain't half th' word f'r it," Ed said curtly.

"You're both firmly convinced that Fran Grant not only knows that her father looted the bank," Eadie said, "but that also knows where he buried the money. Aren't you?"

"I'll bet every buck I'll ever have," Ed said quickly, "against a button, that she knows all there is t' know about it."

"If she don't know," Jim added, "then nobody does, an' that goes double f'r 'er old man, th' polecat! An' if that's th' case, then our dough just sprouted wings an' flew outta th' bank an' disappeared f'rever. Doggone it, Eadie, does that make sense t' you, or t' you, Ed?"

"No," Ed said flatly. "It don't!"

"How 'bout you, Eadie?"

"N-o," she answered doubtfully. "I don't suppose it does."

"Then there y'are!" Jim said triumphantly.

"There's just one more thing we want you t' know, Eadie," Ed began and paused.

"Yes?"

"Eadie," Ed continued, "I think you know how you stand with Jim an' me. You gotta 'dmit we've never treated you like a step-sister, have we? We've allus acted like you was one o' us an' nuthin' else but. Awright then. If we felt diff'rent about you, b'lieve me, 'stead o' worryin' about you an' about you losin' th' last buck you got in th' world, we'd prob'bly say, heck, it's tough an' then we'd just f'rget about it."

"That's right!" Jim said with a nod. "But b'cause we're just one fam'ly, we gotta stick t' t'gether an' do somethin'. Eadie, you're in this same's we are. We're countin' on you doin' your part."

"'Course she will!" Ed said heartily. "Eadie's a Wade clear through an' that means she'll see this thing right down t' th' end no matter what happens. Blood's thicker'n water, y'know, an' that's what counts!"

"Good," Jim said. "Ed, this Marshall feller's in th' way. We gotta do somethin' about him."

"Awright. You got some plan in mind?"

"I'm workin' on one right now. But there'll be parts in it f'r all three o' us."

"I wouldn't want it no other way. Th' Wades'll go in on it all t'gether or they'll stay out uv it. You go ahead an' work it out, Jim, an' when it's ready, just you say th' word an' tell each uv us what we gotta do an' we'll do it. That's th' way you want it, Eadie, ain't it?"

SHE MOISTENED her lips with her tongue, a quick, darting movement of her tongue. She nodded mutely. She turned suddenly and went out of the room. Jim and Ed sat back quietly; they heard her quick, light tread on the stairs. . . presently they heard a door on the upper floor open, then it closed. Jim relaxed, grinned and nudged his brother.

"How'd we do?" he asked. "F'r my money we put it over."

Ed shrugged his shoulder.

"I hope so," he replied. "Fr'm th' looks o' things, we're gonna have our work cut out f'r us handlin' this Marshall feller an' . . . . "

"Wait a minute," Jim interrupted. "I know that Johnny Farrell got a shot at Marshall last night an' missed, but what about Joe Tyler?"

"He ain't back yet."

"Wa-al, then we've still got a chance, ain't we? Joe's a damned good man with a rifle an' mebbe he got Marshall."

"Mebbe, but th' fact that he ain't back yet makes me figger that he didn't do 'ny better'n Farrell did. You know danged well, Jim, that if he plugged Marshall f'r keeps, he'da hightailed it out here right off."

"Yeah," Jim admitted. "I s'ppose he woulda, an' if he couldn't make it, then he'da managed somehow t' get word uv it t' us so's we'd know."

"Uh-huh. Jim, f'r all we know, mebbe Marshall got Tyler instead o' th' other way around."

"Y'might have somethin' there, Ed. Then f'r all we know, while we're chewin' th' rag here, waitin' f'r Tyler t' show up, he might be layin in some alley deader'n all hell!"

Ed nodded gravely.

"That's why I'm hopin' our story an' our little act we cooked up went over with Eadie," he concluded. "I gotta feeling that Marshall's too strong f'r us t' handle 'less we get 'm when he ain't expectin' anything t' happen to 'im.'

"Go on. I'm listenin'."

"Wa-al, what I'm figgerin' on is that we're gonna need Eadie t' help us get him. Once she's sold on th' idea that while he's helpin' Fran stand us off, he's actu'lly helpin' Fran cheat Eadie outta her dough, little Eadie is gonna act up like any other woman an' be willin' t' fix Marshall an' good. Hell, 'less I miss my guess, Jim, she might even play up t' Marshall, lead him off somewhere's where we'll be layin' f'r 'im an' then. . . . "

Jim grinned broadly.

"That'll be th' end o' Mister Marshall!"

"Right!"

"Wa-al, supposin' that's th' way it works out, Ed. What about Eadie? Don't we hafta get rid o' her, too?"

"I got that figgered out, too."

Jim's eyes widened.

"Y'mean we're gonna. . . . "

"NO!" ED SAID curtly. "After we kill off Marshall, th' rest'll be easy. We put s'me pressure on Fran, suddenly realize she don't know a danged thing about th' dough an' admit we got 'er wrong. 'Course it'll be tough on Eadie, so's t' make 'er feel better we'll s'ggest that we scrape up th dough she needs t' take 'er back East. . . "

"Doggone it, that's just what she's allus wanted t' do!"

" 'Course it is! She goes back East an' outta our lives f'rever an' we get her dough well's our own. That's th' hull story."

"You're awright, Ed! You're doggoned smart when it comes t' that kind o' thing!"

Ed smiled coldly.

"You don't know th' half uv it, Jim."

"Reckon that's right, too, Ed. But gettin' back t' cases. . . . "

"Marshall's th' nut we gotta crack. Long's he lives we don't dare do a damned thing. That's why we gotta get things org'nized an' movin' toward gettin' rid o' him!"

* * *

It was an hour later when Ed Wade climbed the stairs to the upper floor and halted in front of Edith's room.

"Eadie!" he called.

There was no response.

"Eadie!" he called again after a brief wait. He heard a stirring, an indistinguishable movement, behind the closed door, waited another moment, then he rapped lightly. "Eadie!"

He heard a more distinct movement.

"She'll be answerin' now," he muttered to himself. "Prob'bly been takin' a nap."

"Yes? What is it?"

"It's me, Eadie. Ed. I wanna see you a minute."

He heard a quick step, a key grated in the lock, then the door was opened.

"Hated t' bother you, Eadie," he said gently.

"Oh, that's all right!"

"Go take a look outta your window," he said, nodding toward it.

SHE EYED him questioningly. . . when he waited patiently without offering to explain his request she turned and went swiftly to the window at the far end of the room. She pushed the curtain aside and peered out. . . she turned suddenly, wide-eyed and white-faced.

"The men," she said quickly, breathlessly. "They're carrying someone into the bunkhouse!"

He nodded mutely. Then her eyes framed a question.

"Joe," he said simply. "Joe Tyler. He's dead. Sam Hodges just brung him here fr'm town."

A gasp escaped her.

"I know how you feel about it," he said gently. "If I ain't mistaken, it was Joe who taught you how t' ride an' shoot. He was allus lookin' after you like he was your big brother. An' now. . . . "

Her lips tightened.

"Who did it, Ed?" she demanded.

He moistened his lips with his tongue. . . withheld his reply purposely.

"Marshall?" she demanded.

He nodded, waited again.

"How. . . how did it happen?"

"Wa-al, seems like Marshall made some kinda crack about you," he answered slowly. " 'Course nob'dy could do anythin' like that in front o' Joe an' get away with it."

"Go on.'

Ed drew a deep breath.

"Wa-al, I don't know much about what happened 'cept that Marshall managed t' get away fr'm Joe who went lookin' f'r 'im. Seems kinda funny, leastways it does t' me, but when they found Joe he was layin' in 'n alley with two bullet holes in 'im."

She caught her lower lip between her teeth, stifling the gasp or perhaps a cry that arose in her throat.

"And Marshall?"

Ed's lips tightened, and his eyes grew steely.

"He got away with a hull skin.

What I meant about it lookin' funny t' me was th' fact that when they come across Joe, he didn't even have a gun on 'im. I got 'n idea he was plugged somewhere's else an' dragged into th' alley an' left there t' die. Chances are, Marshall musta give Joe th' slip, doubled back, come up b'hind 'im an' drilled 'im b'fore Joe knew what was happenin'. Then there was one more thing. . . . "

Her eyes clung to his face, his mouth.

"Joe wasn't th' kind t' do 'is fightin' in no alley. He was kind that spoke his piece or did his fightin' right out in th' open. Th' hull damned thing smells t' me, an' fr'm th' way I figger it out, Joe wasn't just shot. He was murdered in cold blood. An' Mister Marshall, th' dirty, lousy skunk's gonna answer t' th' Wades f'r that, b'lieve me!"

HE HITCHED up his belt viciously, turned and started toward the door. . . he halted midway and turned around again.

"Y'know, Eadie," she heard him say again. "I ain't th' kind who listens t' gossip an' such an' spreads it. But now that I think uv it, mebbe there is somethin' t' th' things I've been hearin'."

She turned quickly.

"What kind of things?"

"Oh, things 'bout Marshall. . . an' 'bout someb'dy else."

Her eyes probed his face. . . he looked away, dug his boot toe into the faded carpet on the floor.

"You mean. . . . "

"Th' hull town's buzzin' with stories ' bout th' goin's on at th' bank," he blurted out, then he looked up again defiantly. "Nob'dy c'n figger out why a feller like Marshall's stayin' around. He don't do 'nything that anyb'dy c'n see. 'Less someb'dy's makin' his stayin' on in Rainbow mighty enticin', he shoulda been gone long ago."

She turned away from him slowly. He gave her a sidelong glance and went out of the room. Jim was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. Ed motioned to him to follow, led him through the kitchen and out of the house.

"Wa-al?"

Ed grinned evilly.

"'Less I'm readin' th' signs wrong, she's just about ready t' slit Mister Marshall's throat f'r 'im. I gave 'er a story that just about kicked th' props out fr'm under 'er."

"An' she swallowed it?"

"Th' hull damned thing!"

Jim grinned back at him.

"Swell, Ed, swell!" he exulted, then he grew serious again. "Ed, I've been wonderin' about somethin'."

"Yeah. . . what?"

"Wa-al, Joe Tyler wasn't th' kind you could send off t' plug a feller in th' back. How come he agreed t' do it without kickin' up a fuss?"

"I told Joe somethin' that made him willin' t' do anything," Ed answered quietly.

Jim's eyes widened.

"What was that?" he asked.

"I tol' 'im that Marshall'd been makin' some nasty r'marks about Eadie an' that was that. Joe didn't hafta hear no more. He grabbed 'is rifle, saddled up an' lit out f'r Rainbow like a bat outta hell!"

CHAPTER VI

Rendezvous

THE BLACK came dashing into a boulder-rimmed circle, snorted protestingly when Marshall pulled him to a full stop. The clatter of approaching hoofs swelled. . . he had heard them earlier and he had instantly voiced a low-pitched, warning whinny but instead of being whirled around and sent racing away to a protected spot until the riders' identities could be determined, Marshall had simply patted the big horse's sleek neck and kept him on the trail. Now he heard a hail. . . he turned his head and saw a cheery wave of a hand, saw Marshall acknowledge it and answer it.

The newcomers broke into the circle and the black noticed that one of them was a woman and he bristled instantly. He disliked women. . . his reason was simple and obvious, a

fear that one of them would come between his master and himself. The black's fear mounted to a new height now. . . the woman was the prettiest he had ever seen. But in that same instant he recognized her. Her sorrel, a dainty-hoofed, clean-limbed mare, whinnied softly, musically, and the black eyed her interestedly.

He felt Marshall swing himself out of the saddle; he saw him stride across the intervening space, hold out his arms and catch the woman in them as she slid to the ground. The black bristled again but the mare sidled up to him and the big horse promptly forgot about his master and the woman.

The second rider was a lean, youthful man with a bandaged right arm in a sling. . . his horse, a big, powerful white animal halted where directed, however he made no attempt to join the other horses. The black turned his head once again. . . he saw Marshall clasp the woman in his arms, saw her raise her head, saw them cling tightly to each other in an embrace, then saw their lips meet. The man with the injured arm grinned down at them.

"Doggone!" he chuckled. "Must be th' air that does things like that t' folks! Go on, go on. . . don't pay 'ny 'ttention t' me! I ain't important. I just come along f'r th' ride!"

But now Marshall and the woman were walking over to him.

"How are you, Smith?" Marshall asked.

"O-h, so-so. You're lookin' fit so I reckon things are shapin' up awright, eh?"

Marshall grinned up at him.

"Yeah, pretty good," he answered.

The horseman nodded.

"How much longer d'you think it'll be?" he asked.

Marshall shrugged his shoulder.

"That's hard t' say, Smith. You oughta know how these things are. You can't push 'em. You hafta let 'em d'velop by th'mselves an' hope t' heck they won't take 'ny longer'n they hafta."

"But, Ned. . . " the woman said looking up at Marshall.

HE SMILED at her, put his arm around her waist.

"Now, honey, don't go gettin' impatient. You know I didn't wanna take this thing on. That feller made me do it," he said, nodding toward the man astride the white horse. "Y'know, it seems like I'm allus gettin' into messes on account o' him allus gettin' hurt just when he oughta be at 'is best. Doggone his hide anyway!"

The man laughed lightly.

"Go on! If it wasn't f'r me, you'd never have 'ny excitement. Foolin' aside, Marsh, you had 'ny trouble?"

"O-h, no more'n I expected. Th' Wades aren't th' nicest folks in th' world an' they don't like th' idea o' havin' me around. Reckon that's b'cause they can't savvy my play. 'Course they've made a couple o' tries t' kinda s'ggest that I hit th' trail. . ."

"That all?"

"An' they've taken a couple o' pot shots at me," Marshall continued casually, "but, shucks, all in all, they aren't 'ny diff'rent than any o' th' other highbinders I've run up against. They're all hell raisers b'cause everyb'dy gets scared o' th'm an' nob'dy dares stand up to 'em. They're th' law most o' th' time or they control it, so they get away with pretty much everything."

"Anything you want me t' do?"

Marshall grinned up at him.

"Reckon th' best thing you c'n do right now is take care o' that busted arm o' yourn," he replied. "How many times does this make it?"

"O-h, four or five," Smith answered lightly. "I ain't sure which it is. But it's th' doggonedest thing how I allus manage t' get plugged in m' right arm!"

"It's a heap safer gettin' plugged there than any place else," Marshall retorted. "Wouldnt do 'nybody any good t' try puttin' a bullet through that head o' yourn. It's harder'n rock. I oughta know. R'member th' time I walloped you an' danged near busted my hand on your head?"

"Sure!" Smith said and he laughed again.

"Ned!" the woman said.

"Yeah?"

"Don't you think Smith should send some of his men to help you?" she asked.

"Nuthin' much they could do 'cept mebbe stir up a heap o' suspicions. No, they wouldn't be helpful. Mebbe later on I'll be able t' use 'em an' if I do need 'em, I'll get word t' Smith an' he can order 'em here."

"Yeah, but don't take any chances an' don't wait 'till th' last minute t' let me know," Smith said sharply.

MARSHALL GRINNED at him. "Don't worry. I'm awf'lly fond o' life, b'lieve me, an' I don't aim t' have 'ny polecats snuff it out ahead o' time," he retorted. "B'sides, th' minute I'm finished here, we're headin' f'r California an nob'dy's gonna stop us again, not even you, Smith Jenkins!'

"I wish we were on our way again!" the woman said quietly but emotionally.

"We will be," Marshall replied. "An' real soon, too! C'mon, honey, you an' Smith'd better be makin' tracks. You've got a long ways t' go b'tween now an' nightfall.

He took her by the arm, led her back to her horse. The black hovered close by.

"Ned," the woman said, turning to Marshall. "You'll be watchful every minute of the day and night, won't you?"

"'Course! But I don't want you doin' a heap o' worryin', understand?"

She was in his arms again. . . she clung to him tightly. His lips brushed her hair.

"It's been so long," she whispered. "It seems like years!"

"I know, honey," he answered. "It's been just as tough on me, b'lieve me, wonderin' what you're doin', what you're thinkin' about an' all that."

Their lips met in a minute-long kiss, then he released her, lifted her into the saddle. He handed her the reins, patted the sorrel's arched neck.

"Take care o' her," he cautioned the sorrel. "Don't forget that!"

He stepped back. . . the sorrel wheeled, clattered forward and ranged herself alongside the big white horse. Smith Jenkins settled himself in his saddle, gripped the reins in his left hand.

"So long, Marsh!" he called. "Keep in touch with me an' lemme know right off if you need 'nything!"

"Goodbye, darling!" the woman called.

The white loped away with the sorrel at his flanks. The black edged forward, rubbed his nose against Marshall's shoulder. . . Marshall however gave no sign. He followed the southward racing horses. . . when they reined in for a moment and both Smith and the woman twisted around in their saddles and waved, he whipped off his hat and waved it vigorously in farewell. Presently, perhaps within a minute's time, they reached the head of the southward trail. . . when it dipped down sharply, they disappeared from sight. Soon, too, the metallic echo of their horses' hoofs faded out completely. Marshall turned slowly, heavily. . . he turned and eyed the waiting black, patted the horse's neck.

"Reckon that's that," he said. "We're all alone again."

The big horse pawed the ground.

'Yeah," Marshall said, nodding. "We might's well get goin'. Ain't anything t' keep us here any longer."

HE SHIFTED his holsters, reached for the reins and vaulted lightly into the saddle. The black stiffened suddenly and Marshall quickly looked up. A low-pitched whinny broke from the black. . . mechanically Marshall's right hand dropped and tightened around the butt of a ready Colt. Now he heard the ring of hoofs on stone and shale and a horse and rider emerged into the clearing from behind a huge boulder. When the rider looked up, Marshall's hand came away from his gun butt. . . it was Edith Wade. She clattered up, reined in a dozen feet away from him.

"Howdy," he said briefly.

She did not acknowledge his greeting. She shifted herself a bit in her saddle, easing herself. There was a cold, tight-lipped smile on her face.

Her eyes ranged over him for a moment.

"The great lover himself," she said coldly, nodding to herself. "I suppose I should apologize for peeping while you were emoting in that so touching farewell scene. Actually, it was quite accidental. You see, I was riding by when you and your lady-love fell into each other's arms, and I simply couldn't go on 'till the scene was over. I was s i m p l y overwhelmed."

He was motionless, and mute. . . he eyed her quietly and patiently.

"I didn't realize you were such a lady's man," she went on tauntingly, "despite the stories I've heard about you. But now that I've seen you in one of your moments, I know better. Incidentally, that girl was very attractive. And the way she clung to you and kissed you, wh-y, Marshall, I think the silly fool's in love with you! But on the other hand, there's no telling. . .she may have been playing a role just as you were!"

His eyes glinted dangerously but she disregarded it and went on recklessly.

"She didn't look familiar to me," she continued. "Does she work in one of the saloons in Rainbow? N-o, I didn't think she was one of the local belles. You're far too clever to have her so close to Rainbow. Heavens. . . think of the complications that might arouse! Suppose Fran Grant were to compare notes with her? That would never do, would it?"

Her horse inched his way closer to the black. M a r s h a l l, watching, nudged the black. . .the big horse suddenly snorted, so frighteningly, that Edith's mount, shying away in haste and alarm, almost unseated her. Marshall grinned. . .he was himself again.

"WA'AL?" he demanded. "You finished? You oughta be, judging by th' way that tongue o' yourn's bein' goin'. Now s'ppose you just turn aroun' an' go on back where you come fr'm. If you don't, I'm li'ble t' get awful mad. An' when I get mad, th' on'y thing that calms me down is t' give some flannel-mouthed young kid that ain't dry yet b'hind th' ears, a doggoned good spankin'. Go on now. . .turn that cayuse aroun' an' get outta here."

She bristled, sat upright in the saddle, tightened her grip on the reins. Tiny patches of white anger danced into her flushed cheeks. Suddenly she spurred her horse. . .he protested, however he y i e l d e d finally, bounded forward only to have Marshall swing the black around directly in his path.

"You're goin' th' wrong way," Marshall said curtly. "Turn around."

He leaned forward out of the saddle, grabbed the Wade horse's bridle, wheeled him.

"There y' are," he said and released the bridle.

Edith's hand f l a s h e d. . .she slapped Marshall across the face, a stinging, ringing slap. He stared at her wide-eyed, perhaps he was a bit dazed, too. Her horse bolted away like a frightened deer. Edith twisted around in her saddle.

"I hate you!" she screamed. "I hate you!"

He touched his reddened cheek, shook his head.

"Reckon I know how she feels about me," he muttered. He followed her with his eyes. In another minute she was gone, flashing over the range at breakneck speed, racing her mount down a twisting trail that led eastward to the Bar-O. Marshall shook his head again.

"Doggoned hell-cat," he muttered.

He turned slowly, settled himself in the saddle. The black twisted his head, looked up at him, waiting and wondering. Finally, when Marshall failed to nudge him, the big horse took things upon himself. . .he trotted away. When Marshall made no attempt to check him, he quickened his pace to a brisk canter.

* * *

The days that followed passed slowly, long, tedious, uneventful days, and seemingly never-ending. Daily, Edith Wade rode into the range, hopefully watchful, studying the trails and the blue sky for signs

of billowing dust, the wake of a horse's hoofs. From mid-morning until late afternoon, she rode slowly through the low country, then up and down trails, but always with the boulder-rimmed clearing as the center of her riding arc. Finally, in the late afternoon, when the chill winds began to sweep down, she would wheel her jaded mount and ride back to the Bar-O.

At home she went about her duties silently. It was natural that Jim and Ed should notice it. . .they did, and when her back was turned they looked at each other questioningly, and each gave the other the same reply, a shrug of the shoulder.

"WHAT d'you make uv it?" Jim asked one day while Edith was absent from the ranch.

"Dunno what t' make uv it," Ed replied. "I've been noticin' how she hustles outta here right after she gets th' place t' rights, but where'n heck she goes to, I'm doggoned if I c'n even guess."

"Mebbe we oughta ask 'er," Jim suggested hopefully. He hesitated for a moment, then he continued. "Ed, reckon I might's well tell you that I follered 'er th' other day. But I'm damned if she did a doggoned thing in th' four hours I trailed 'er but ride up hill an' down, this way an' that, until I was plumb worn out I was ridin' one o' th' new horses we got an' th' blamed cayuse ain't himself yet after ridin' around I gave 'im. What d'you say we ask 'er, huh?"

Ed shook his head.

"Nope," he said finally, heavily. "We'll just leave 'er alone, leastways f'r th' time bein' anyway. Mebbe she's just ridin' somethin' off, somethin' we don't savvy. Y'know, Jim, Pop allus used t' say 'er mother was a loner sometimes, too. He got used to it. When she wanted t' talk, he talked, an' when she acted like she wanted no part uv 'im, he gave 'er a wide berth. Y'know, women-folks are doggoned mysterious critters. Sometimes they don't even savvy th'mselves so how'n hell c'n a man do it? Eadie'll get over it an' that'll be that."

"Wa-al, I sure hope so. S-ay, you don't think she's comin' down with somethin', do you?"

"Huh? O-h, y'mean mebbe she's gettin somethin?"

"Could be, couldn't it?" Jim persisted.

"I don't think so," Ed answered. "She's young an' if I didn't know better, th' on'y thing I'd say was ailin' 'er was that she was in love. But, heck, Jim, you know as well's I do that that's ridiculous. She's just growin' up an' prob'bly don't know what t' make uv it. But give 'er time an' she'll be 'erself again. Just watch an' see if she ain't."

CHAPTER VII

Marshall Gets Down to Cases

MIKE GALLO was standing in the open doorway of the Star when Marshall emerged from the bank and came sauntering up the street.

"Mornin'," Gallo said briefly. Marshall nodded to him in reply. "How's things?"

Marshall halted, hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"O-h, awright," he answered. "Hear o' anyboy else bein' on th' prowl f'r me since th' Sheriff tried t' pin that Bendix killin' on me as a murder?"

Gallo grinned. . .his white, even teeth flashed brightly when his lips parted.

"Nope. Reckon you've been b'havin' y'self, eh?"

"I usu'lly do."

"'Course," he said quickly. "S-ay, Marshall, you plannin' t' stay on in Rainbow?"

'Dunno. Haven't made up my mind yet. Why?"

"Wa-al, you don't look t' me like th' kind o' feller who c'n be satisfied just hangin' aroun' an' doin' nuthin' "

"Thanks," Marshall said dryly.

"I ain't finished yet. Jim Lane who owns th' X-Bar-X spread was in here last night an' told me his foreman's quittin'. Lane's a pretty square shooter an' th' job's worth c'nsidering if you ain't plannin' t' hightail it. Th' pay's good an' it's allus on th' line when payday comes around.

That's more'n I c'n say 'bout most bosses I've heard tell of."

Marshall nodded in agreement.

"I wouldn't mind puttin' in a good word for you, Marshall, an' it might mean somethin' with Lane. We've been good friends f'r a long time. But b'fore I say 'nything t' Lane, I'd like t' know that if you take th' job it wouldn't be just f'r a spell, say t' tide you over 'till you got s'me foldin' money in your kick an' then you hit th' trail. I wouldn't wanna do that t' Lane b'cause he wants a feller permanent. What d'you think?"

"How soon does he hafta know?"

"O-h, in a couple o' days."

"Then s'ppose I think about it an' let you know?"

"Swell. He'll be in town again 'bout th' end o' th' week. You lemme know b'fore that."

"I'll do that, an' thanks f'r thinkin' o' me f'r th' job."

"Forget it," Gallo said with a dismissing gesture of his hand. "Wa-al, reckon I'd better get things org'nized inside. Stop by again an' lemme know what t' do about that job."

"Wait a minute," Marshall said quickly. "If you got another minute t' spare, I'd like t' ask you somethin', Gallo. You mind?"

"Nope," the cafe owner answered. "Go 'head. What's botherin' you?"

"It's about Fran Grant's father an' th' bank."

"Oh! Look, Marshall, s'ppose we go inside? It's a heap easier t' talk in there."

"Whatever you say."

GALLO turned and led the way into the cafe. Marshall followed at his heels. They halted presently at the bar and leaned over it.

"How 'bout a drink?" Gallo asked. "My own stuff, y'know."

Marshall shook his head.

"Too early in th' day f'r me," he replied. "Gallo, I wanna know what you know about Grant an' th' bank."

"Don't know much, Marshall. I had some dough in there same's most everybody else in town did. When th' place was robbed, that was th' end o' my dough an' of th' others. But that's all I c'n tell you."

"Th' Wades've been yelpin' f'r all they're worth that it was Grant 'imself who robbed th' bank an' that Fran was either in on it or knows where 'er pop cached th' dough. What's your opinion?"

"Haven't got 'ny."

"Come on, Gallo. . .don't gimme that."

The big man shrugged his shoulder.

"You asked me an' I answered you th' on'y way I know," he said doggedly. "What d'you want me t' do? Want me t' tell you what someb'dy else says or what I think about it?"

"I don't give a damn f'r what anybody else says. I wanna know what you know," Marshall retorted.

"Awright then. You just r'member that I got th' Star t' watch over so's it don't just move out on me. That, Mister, is a full time job, b'lieve me, an' handlin' that don't leave me time f'r mindin' anybody else's bus'ness. How'n hell would I know what Grant was doin' over t' his place or what he was cookin' up? He never came in here. An' th' on'y time I ever saw him was when I went over t' th' bank t' d'posit s'me dough an' that wasn't often."

"Yeah, but. . ."

"'Course I've heard a lotta talk since th' robbery but what uv it? Th' Wades c'n holler all they wanna but it don't prove 'nything, does it?"

"Gallo, d'you think it was 'n outside job?"

"It could've been. An' it could've been any one uv mebbe a dozen hombres right here in Rainbow who could've done th' job. But that don't prove 'nything either, does it?"

"Quit stallin'. You hear a lot o' them shootin' off their mouths when they're drunk, so you oughta know somethin'."

GALLO eyed him for a moment. "What's your angle, Marshall?" he asked presently. "What are you after?"

"Haven't got 'ny angles an' I don't figger t get a damned thing out uv it."

"I'm still listenin'."

"You c'n b'lieve this or not, but all I'm trying t' do is help Fran Grant out uv a lousy mess."

"You're a stranger here, Marshall. Why are you buttin' into somethin' that don't c'ncern you?"

"I'm buttin' into it b'cause th' hull thing smells bad t' me an' b'cause it all centers aroun' a girl who can't fight back. Want 'ny more reasons?"

Gallo seemed to be smiling.

"Who d'you think robbed th' bank, Marshall?" he asked.

"Who?" Marshall echoed loudly. "Th' Wades, that's who! They killed Grant, robbed th' bank an' now they're hollerin' bloody murder just t' cover th'mselves up. Th' hull thing's so doggoned crooked, it. . . it stinks out loud!"

"An' s'pposin' they did everything you say they did, Marshall," Gallo went on quietly. "What c'n you do about it?"

"Dunno yet, but mebbe I c'n cook up somethin'."

Gallo was silent for a moment. . . he eyed Marshall thoughtfully, appraisingly. Presently he nodded.

"Uh-huh," he said. "Mebbe you can."

"I will!"

Gallo's thick fingers drummed on the surface of the bar.

"Marshall," he said finally. "I b'lieve you. I think you're on th' level."

"You know damn' well I am," Marshall said evenly.

"An' b'cause I think you're on th' level," Gallo continued, "I'm gonna give you a lead."

"Now you're talkin'!"

"You understan', uv course, that if anybody ever gets wind o' this, that'll be th' end o' me?"

Marshall stiffened.

"Nob'dy's ever accused me o' talkin' outta turn," he said sharply. "Or o' talkin' too much."

"That's what I'm bankin' on," Gallo went on calmly. "An' that's why I'm gonna back your play. 'Course I'll hafta keep in th' background, but you'll understan' that I'm on'y doin' that t' stay alive. We better have that understood right off."

"Awright. . .that's settled."

Galo looked toward the door, then he bent closer to Marshall.

"Jim Wade," he whispered.

"Huh? What d'you mean. . .Jim Wade?"

"Sh-h-h!" Gallo cautioned him. "You don't hafta holler, y'know!"

MARSHALL gave him a cold stare.

"Awright!" he said gruffly, then in a lower tone of voice. "Now what was that about Jim Wade?"

"He's th' man f'r you t' work on."

"Y'mean he did th' job?"

"Nope. I dunno just what he did 'cept that he did somethin'."

"Yeah, but. . ."

"Look, Marshall, I know what I'm doin' so just take things th' way I give 'em to you, then we'll get somewheres. I didn't hafta be a witness to it t' know that th' Wades engineered th' robbin' an' th' killin'. I just know they did it an' let it go at that."

"Awright, Gallo. . .let's get back t' Jim Wade."

"I said "Jim Wade' b'cause I know fr'm experience that he's th' easier one o' th' two brothers t' handle. Put th' pressure on 'im, scare th' pants off 'im an' he'll spill his guts out. Get th' idea?"

"Yeah," Marshall said slowly, thoughtfully. "Sure."

"I dunno how or when you're gonna get t' him," Gallo continued. "But you'll hafta work that out f'r y'self."

"Jim Wade," Marshall mused.

"He's your man."

Marshall hitched up his pants. . . Gallo watched him, watched him shift his twin holsters a bit.

"Wa-al," Marshall said finally with a quiet grin. "Now I've got somethin' to work on."

Gallo shrugged his shoulder.

"It's a starter," he admitted. "But how far you get with what y'know d'pends on how smart y'are. Just you r'member that th' Wades are ornery an' that they've got a lot o' friends 'round these parts. You're a loner, an' you're gonna find that everybody's against you. If you get away with what you're gonna hafta do an' with a hull skin, you'll be luckier'n all hell. Wa-al, so long, Marshall, an' good luck. 'Less I miss my guess, you're gonna need a heap uv it!"

Gallo pulled his horse to an abrupt stop. He had heard approaching hoof beats. . .now he could see the hatted head and the shoulders of a horseman coming toward him, swinging through a rocky pass. He stood up in his stirrups and looked eagerly.

"Jim!" he yelled and dropped down into his saddle.

He dug his spurs into his horse's flanks, sent him bounding forward. The oncoming man rode into the open. . .it was Jim Wade. . .looked up, recognized Gallo and waved in answer to the cafe owner's yell of recognition. Presently Gallo came dashing up.

"H'llo, Mike," Jim called and pulled up. He seemed surprised to see Gallo and added: "What are you doin' out this way? Didn't know you ever went sight seein' or callin'."

Gallo halted his mount, wheeled him around and ranged him alongside Wade's.

"I come out here just t' see you, Jim," he replied. "I was hopin' I'd run into you away fr'm th' ranch."

Wade's eyebrows arched.

"Yeah? Why?"

GALLO eased himself in the saddle, shoved his hat back from his eyes. Jim did likewise, almost mechanically.

"Got somethin' I wanted t' talk t' you about. Somethin' personal," Gallo said, "an' private."

"Oh," Jim said and waited.

"It's about Marshall."

Jim's face clouded.

"Marshall?" he repeated. "What about 'im, th' skunk?"

"We'll come t' him in a minute, Jim," Gallo said. "First there's somethin' else. You an' me've been friends f'r a long time, ain't we?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Must be more'n ten years."

"More or less, but what's that gotta do with Marshall?" Jim demanded. "I don't savvy th' c'nnection"

Gallo smiled patiently.

"You will in a minute, Jim," he continued. "I just wanted t' r'mind you o' how long we've been friends b'cause what I gotta say t' you, I want you t' take th' way one friend'd take fr'm another. That awright?"

"Reckon so. .leastways, it is so far."

"Then let's go on. Jim, you've allus had t' play second fiddle t' Ed. That's right, ain't it?"

Jim Wade frowned. He eyed Gallo sharply now.

"Go on," he said curtly.

"Not that I don't think a heap o' Ed," Gallo went on reassuringly. "I do, b'lieve me, b'cause they don't come 'ny better'n Ed. It's just that I like both o' you an' somethin' come up an' I think you oughta be th' man t' do it an' grab off some o' th' thunder f'r y'self f'r a change."

"I'm still listenin'," Jim said.

"Jim, th' feller who gets Marshall'll be just about th' biggest thing in this country. 'Course if that p'rticular feller should be either you or Ed that'll be natural. If it happens t' be someb'dy else, he'll be bigger'n you an' Ed by a mile. That right?"

"Y-eah," Jim admitted. "I s'ppose so."

Gallo smiled, then he braced himself.

"Jim, you could be that feller easy," he said quietly. "You're better'n most with a six-gun, heaps better'n Ed if it ever came to a test. You just ain't never had t' step out on your own an' show folks just what you could do if you had to."

Wade looked at him and grinned.

"Hey, Mike. .are you tryin' t' kid me?" he demanded.

"Nope," Gallo answered. "I've been hearin' a lot o' other folks sayin' doggoned nice things about you, Jim, an' it kinda got me t' thinkin'. An' th' more I thought about th' idea, th' more I b'come c'vinced that you're just th' feller t' take Marshall an' get Rainbow back t' normal."

JIM DID not answer. .he looked away, quietly, tight-lipped, thoughtfully.

"Marshall ain't half as good as folks like t' make him out," Gallo went on shortly. "An' Jim, in this case, it wouldn't have t' be 'n even draw. Savvy?"

Jim turned to him again quickly.

"Y'mean. . . ."

"You could get th' drop on 'im an' then pour it into 'im."

"Yeah, I s'ppose so."

"He comes into th' Star regular," Gallo continued. "Now if you were t' drop in, s-ay, in th' evenin', pay no attention to 'im, kinda make your way up t' th' bar so's he wouldn't get suspicious, jerk out your gun an' give it to 'im, that'd be that, an' you'd be top man. What do you say, Jim?"

"Ed know anything o' this?"

"Nope," Gallo answered. "I ain't seen Ed f'r some time now. What's more, I don't want to 'till this thing's over. Jim, just picture it f'r y'self. . walkin' into th' ranchhouse an' sayin' t' Ed, "Wa-al, that's that. I just got Marshall'. C'n you picture Ed, hearin' that? Heck. . . .!"

There was a cold, hard smile on Jim's face. Unconsciously his hand dropped and tightened around the butt of his gun, tightened around it so viciously that it seemed crushed in his huge hand.

"Yeah, Mike," he said presently, almost breathlessly. "I think Mister Marshall's about t' get what's due 'im. An' I'm gonna be th' feller t' give it to 'im!"

Gallo laughed softly. .he clapped Jim on his broad back.

"Good f'r you!" he said heartily. "Let's shake on it!"

They gripped hands for a moment. Then Gallo straightened up in his saddle.

"T'morrow night'd be a good time, Jim," he said. "I'll see to it that Marshall's there. An' Jim. . . ."

"Yeah?"

"I'd make sure if I was you that Ed didn't know anything 'bout this so's he couldn't bust in ahead o' you an' spoil things. Y'know, Ed's allus kinda jealous o' anyb'dy gettin' ahead o' him, an' you know what he'd do t' be th' one t' kill Marshall. He'd give everything he's got f'r th' honor o' bein' known as th' feller who killed Marshall."

"I know," Jim said quickly, responsively. "I know, on'y this time Ed's gonna have t' take my smoke. This is gonna be my party, all mine!"

"An' I'll have somethin' on hand t' help make that party th' doggonedest, biggest party Rainbow's ever had! Be seein' you, Jim!"

CHAPTER VIII

Storm Clouds

IT WAS late afternoon. Edith had returned from her daily 'ride', and now, her horse unsaddled and turned loose in the corral, she was standing at the fence behind the barn, staring moodily into space. She looked skyward listlessly. . . soon it would be evening. Lengthening shadows had already made their appearance; she could see them draping their veils over the range, over the house beyond the corral.

She was tired and the thought of preparing supper sickened her. But she forced herself to turn around, started slowly toward the house. She passed the barn. . . she stopped when she heard a voice within. Curiosity forced her to walk to the open doorway, to peer inside. For a moment she could distinguish nothing in the barn's shadowy dimness. . . the voice gritted again presently, and it guided her eyes to the last stall at the far end of the barn. It was Jim's voice. . and now she could see him, a huge, hulking figure of a man. He was just outside the stall, facing it, crouching strangely like a great shaggy lion about to spring. He moved suddenly, cat-like despite his bulk, and she saw a leveled gun flash into his right hand. Her eyes widened.

"Yeah, Marshall," she heard Jim say curtly. "It's me, Jim Wade. You musta figgered it'd be you an' me some day. Reckon this is th' day, awright, an' it means th' end o' the trail f'r you. 'Course, if you wanna, go right ahead an' reach f'r them Colts o' yourn. I'm gonna kill you anyway, but it'll look a heap better f'r me if you make some kind o' play, y'know."

Edith was over the threshold now.

Jim laughed softly.

"'Smatter?" he taunted. "Fraid t' move, eh? Wa-al, mebbe it's just as well. You other fellers. . . g'wan, get outta there an' over t' th' other side o' th' room. I'm gonna start blastin' in a minute an' I don't wanna splatter this skunk's guts all over you."

He laughed again. . . he stopped abruptly, whirled around when he heard Edith's quick step on the creaking floor boards.

"O-h," he said quickly, sheepishly. "Didn't hear you come in, Eadie."

She swept past him now, peered into the stall. .she turned and looked at him.

"Oh, Jim!" she said, almost reproachfully.

HE FLUSHED beneath her steady eyes. She leaned back against the wall. . . he looked away, holstered his gun awkwardly, hitched up his pants, then he jerked his head up and faced her again defiantly, doggedly.

"Go ahead an' laugh if you wanna," he said gruffly. "It's awright. I won't get mad. But mebbe t'morrow it'll be diff'rent. Mebbe then I'll do all th' laughin' 'round here."

'What. . . what do you mean?"

"Nuthin'," he said quickly, then a shrewd gleam brightened his eyes. He laughed softly. "Nuthin' a-tall."

She eyed him for another moment, then she stepped past him, marched to the door. .she reached the doorway and stopped. Jim, at her heels, crowded her.

"Ed," she said simply.

He peered over her shoulder. . . he saw his brother trudging up the path toward the house. For a moment Jim watched him, tight-lipped and silent, then Ed reached the house and went in.

"Eadie," he said.

"Yes?" she asked over her shoulder.

"You go on up t' th' house, too. It's most supper-time anyway. If Ed asks f'r me, you just say you ain't seen me. Say it like you mean it, understand?"

She turned to him.

"But aren't you coming in for. . . .?"

He shook his head.

"No," he answered. "I'll skip supper f'r t'night. If I'm hungry, I c'n eat later on. Right now I gotta get goin'. Got somethin' to 'tend to."

"You're going to Rainbow?"

"Yeah," he said grimly. "I'm gonna take care o' Mister Marshall t'night. But I don't want a peep outta you about it, y'hear, t' Ed or anybody else."

She stared at him. .he mistook the expression in her widened eyes and on her face for worry about him.

"It's awright," he said quickly, reassuringly. "Nuthin's gonna happen t' me. Everything's arranged. Just r'member what I told you an' I'll see you later."

He patted her shoulder clumsily, then he pushed past her out of the barn, tramped away toward the corral. His horse, already saddled, was tied up just inside the corral gate. Edith saw him climb into the saddle, wheel and ride out of the corral. He spurred his horse, rode westward at a gallop. Presently he was out of sight.

A sob burst from Edith. She plunged out of the barn, raced blindly toward the corral. She flung open the gate. .there were a dozen horses idling close by and they looked up, shied and backed away. Her own horse turned his head and looked at her. . . he alone did not move. Her saddle lay against a nearby post and she snatched it up, swung it over her horse's back. A minute later, astride her mount, she came whirling out of the corral, spurred him and sent him racing away after Jim. Two men came out of the bunkhouse. . they stopped, looked up, followed her swift flight with puzzled eyes.

"H'M," ONE man muttered. "Looks like she's in one helluva sweat t' get somewhere's, don't it?"

"Uh-huh," his companion answered.

"An' she's ruinin' some mighty good horseflesh gettin' there," the

first man continued. "Y'know, Buck, I've been watchin' that young un th' last couple o' days an' if anybody was t' ask me, she's. . . ."

"Who's askin' you?" the second man said gruffly.

"Nobody, but. . . ."

"Then why don't you f'rget it?"

"F'r Pete's sake. .what is this? Th' first time I open m' mouth, I get stepped on."

"That's a heap easier on you than havin' somethin' else happen to you. Long's you work f'r th' Wades, don't go shootin' off your mouth 'bout any o' th'm."

"But I wasn't doin' no such thing!"

"Mebbe not, Danny, but I wasn't takin' any chances. You don't know th' Wades like I do. Fr'm now on, take my advice, partner. .don't go passin' no opinions 'bout anything 'round here. You just r'member that an' you'll live longer an' happier. Savvy? Awright then. .come on."

* * *

Edith rode swiftly onward. Mile after mile fell away behind her, then suddenly she swerved her horse and sent him racing away in a southerly direction. After a mile she swung westward again. She twisted around in the saddle and looked back. Her heart beat faster, happily, for there was no sign of Jim. Her southward, circling ride, had brought her safely past him and now if she could maintain her pace, she would reach Rainbow ahead of him. It was dusk now and the thought of the approaching, deepening darkness frightened her. She leaned forward, patted her horses neck. . . he seemed to understand, seemed too to quicken his pace in answer to her touch.

* * *

She felt stronger now and she raised her head. .in the distance, a little below them, she could see a glow of dimmed yellowish lights. It was Rainbow. In a few minutes they were going down a gentle, grassy slope; minutes later they were racing up the street toward the bank.

There were men on both sides of the street, lounging, idling, talking men; there were men standing in lighted doorways. .they looked up when she dashed past them, turned and watched her interestedly, saw her slip to the ground and scamper across the sidewalk to the bank's door. They saw her fling it open and burst in. They looked at one another. .there was no comment, no voiced comment, no reaction save a simple shrugging of shoulders, and in some few instances, an equally expressive arching of eyebrows.

"EDITH!" Fran said in surprise from the connecting doorway between the bank proper and the living quarters beyond it. "This is a surprise!"

Edith whirled, stared at her.

"Where is he?" she demanded breathlessly.

"He?" Fran repeated.

"Marshall!" Edith said impatiently.

"Oh!"

"Fran, I must see him at once! It's important. . . terribly important!"

"Really!"

Their eyes met and clashed. There was excitement, emotion, even rising anger in Edith's eyes; Fran's were steadier, calmer. .and restrained.

"I'm sorry," Fran said finally. "But he isn't here at the moment. However, I'll be glad to give him a message if you care to leave one."

There was a brief, second-long silence.

"Do you know where he is?" Edith pressed eagerly. "Or where he's gone?"

Fran smiled coldly.

"No," she replied. "I don't. Actually, I don't consider his going and coming any of my business. He isn't married to me, you know. He's merely an employee of the bank."

Edith's lip curled scornfully. At the words "employee of the bank," she turned her head and looked about her. The vast emptiness of the "bank" and its complete lack of everything save a single, low counter, brought a fleeting smile to her face. Fran disregarded it completely. She waited

patiently, unhurried and unruffled until Edith faced her again.

"And now," she continued, "I hope you will excuse me. Of course, I shall tell Marshall that you were here. Doubtless, he'll be sorry he missed you."

Edith turned slowly. Fran smiled again, watched the younger girl for another moment.

"Perhaps you'd like to wait for him?" she asked. "Of course, I must warn you that it may be a matter of hours, perhaps even days, however. . ."

Edith looked at her over her shoulder.

"Jim," she said quietly and simply, "is on his way here to kill him."

There was no reply from Fran, no visible reaction, no outward movement. Suddenly she smiled again. . . then she laughed softly.

"Really?" she said and laughed again. "That's the most amusing thing I've ever heard. Here you are, a Wade, someone who tried to kill him once, expecting me to believe such a childish story. Do you think I'm as naive as all that, to believe such a story from you and about your own brother? Really, Edith. . . that's asking too much of me! Frankly, I'm glad, for your sake, of course, that Marshall isn't here. I know what his reaction would be and I'm glad you're saved the embarrassment of hearing it. Must you be going?"

EDITH, HER face flushed with anger, wheeled and marched to the door. But in the doorway she halted again for a final word.

"You may tell him," she began icily.

"Yes, my dear?" Fran called tauntingly. "I may tell him what?"

Edith's jaws snapped shut. She stormed out, returned almost immediately and pulled the door shut. She dashed across the sidewalk and swung up into the saddle, wheeled her mount, spurred him and sent him racing up the street. Men turned and looked at her. . . she saw none of them. It was only when she thundered past the Star that she pulled up abruptly. . . Jim's horse was tied up at the rail. For a moment she stared at the horse. . . presently she settled back in the saddle and dashed out of town.

In the bank Fran Grant was standing stiffly, motionlessly, still facing the closed door. She whirled suddenly.

"Tom!" she screamed. "Tom!"

The old man appeared in the connecting doorway.

"Yeah, Fran?"

She ran to him, grasped his arms.

"Tom," she gasped. "You must find Marshall. You must, you understand? Jim Wade is on his way here to kill him!"

CHAPTER IX

Plot and Counterplot

JIM WADE, his face flushed, leaned over the bar. . . he caught up the bottle in front of him and poured himself another drink. Mike Gallo was standing at the far end of the bar, his eyes fixed on the open doorway. The bartender nudged him and Mike looked at him questioningly. . . . he followed the bartender's eyes toward the bottle in front of Jim.

"Give 'im another one?" the bartender's lips framed the words without actually voicing them.

Gallo nodded. . . the bartender whisked a bottle off the shelf behind him, uncorked it and placed it on the bar. Jim drained his glass.

"That f'r me?" he asked, eyeing the second bottle interestedly.

"Yep," the bartender replied. He removed the empty bottle, filled Jim's glass with whiskey from the second bottle. "There y'are, partner. Drink 'er down!"

Jim grinned broadly. His beady eyes seemed to gleam all the brighter in his liquor-flushed face.

"Leave that t' me!" he said. He lifted the glass. "Here's mud in your eye!"

He swallowed the drink, put down the glass. . . Mike Gallo sidled up to him, nudged him.

"Jim!"

"Yeah?"

"He's back," Gallo whispered.

"Huh? O-h, y'mean Marshall?"

"Yep. He just rode past. He's prob'bly reached th' bank by now."

"Uh-huh."

"Wa-al?" Gallo pressed him.

"What d'you figger I oughta do? Go after 'im?"

"What d'you figger you oughta do?"

Jim straightened up, hitched up his belt, shifted his holster a bit.

"Wa-al, reckon this is it," he said grimly.

Gallo clapped him on the back.

"An' you'll do it, too!" he said. "My dough's on you, Jim. I ain't never picked th' wrong man yet an' I don't aim t' spoil that record now. Go ahead an' get it over with!"

Jim nodded. He turned slowly, started toward the door. . . midway he quickened his pace and strode out. Gallo smiled fleetingly. The bartender reached for the bottle. . . he checked himself, looked at Gallo.

"Want a drink, Boss?" he asked.

Gallo turned his head.

"Huh? A drink?" he repeated. "Yeah, Charley, I'll have a drink. I think I got one comin' to me!"

The bartender eyed him curiously. . . wisely he refrained from saying anything; he produced a clean glass, filled it and shoved it across the bar.

"There y'are, Boss," he said.

Gallo nodded, lifted the glass to his lips.

"Here's how!"

"How!" Charley said.

Gallo swallowed the drink, reached for the bottle and refilled his glass.

* * *

MARSHALL dismounted, led the black down the alley that ran alongside the bank, then around the building to the lean-to behind it. Tom Lewis appeared in the doorway of the lean-to.

"I've been lookin' all over f'r you," he said directly. "You see anything o' Jim Wade?"

"Nope."

"Seen anything o' Eadie Wade?"

Marshall shook his head.

"Jim's in town," Tom continued. "Better watch y'self. He's here t' get you."

"Ed with 'im?"

"Nope. Jim's playin' this string out all by 'imself."

"An' Eadie?"

"She come into town ahead o' Jim. She come straight t' th' bank t' warn you 'bout Jim."

The expression on Marshall's face reflected his surprise.

"Eadie did?"

Old Tom grinned.

"Uh-huh. She an' Fran opened up on each an' f'r a minute I kinda expected I'd hafta dig me a hole somewhere's t' crawl into t' keep fr'm bein' scalped. I was inside but I didn't let on I could hear th'm. S-ay, Marshall, mebbe you don't know it but if you do, mebbe you don't care a hoot, but both o' them girls are in love with you."

"Now it's two o' th'm, eh?"

"Uh-huh. I tol' you b'fore, I c'n read th' signs. This time I didn't hafta read 'nything. I heard 'em an' right out loud, too, an' there was no mistakin' 'em. Fran's jealous as a cat an' she sure showed it. 'Course I was kinda s'rprised t' hear Eadie talk up. I had her pegged as bein' just a mite too young f'r that sort o' thing, but now that I think uv it, hell, no female's too young or too old f'r romancin'!"

Tom patted the black's neck.

"What'n hell d'you do t' women t' make 'em act up like that, huh?" he demanded. "I'm doggoned if I c'n figger it out. Fr'm what I've seen an' heard, you don't seem t' lead 'em on or encourage 'em any, but I'm damned if they still don't fall all over th'mselves declarin' th'mselves in on you. I'm plumb stumped!"

MARSHALL laughed lightly. He unsaddled the black.

"Y'know," Tom continued. 'When I was a young feller, I used t' think I was a top hand with th' women. But, heck, you got me beat a dozen diff'rent ways fr'm th' ace when it comes t' breakin' hearts. Th' on'y way I c'n figger it out is that it's that shyin' away fr'm women th' way you do that gets 'em. It must be!"

Marshall stepped to the doorway of the lean-to. . . he dropped the saddle just inside the door.

"I used t' think women liked big, rough, he-men," Tom went on. "Sweep 'em off their feet', was th' way I went after 'em. But now I c'n see that that was all wrong. Your way's a heap better. Wa-al, you live an' you learn, eh, Marshall?"

"Where's Jim Wade now?" the latter asked.

"Huh? Jim? O-h, he's down t' th' Star sloppin' up that rat poison Mike Gallo sells f'r whiskey. I poked m' head in there when I come past a little while ago, an' fr'm what I could see uv 'im, Jim was doin' awright f'r 'imself."

Marshall had listened atentively. . now he nodded.

"If that's th' way it is," he remarked, "then th' chances are he won't be lookin' f'r anything but a place t' sleep it off."

"Dunno about that," Tom said quickly, warningly. "What's more, I wouldn't even count on it neither. There's no tellin' with them Wades. Th' on'y thing you c'n figger on far's they're c'ncerned is that they're mean an' ornery an' that if you give th'm a break, you're a sucker."

. ."*I* don't aim t' give th'm anything," Marshall said determinedly. "Leastways, no more'n I have to. I know their kind. You either kill them or you get killed. It's that simple."

Tom nodded in agreement.

"That's right. So if Jim shows up here an' he makes just one move, give it to 'im good an' proper. Th' sooner th' Wades get killed off, th' sooner Rainbow c'n settle down t' livin'."

There was a sudden shout from the direction of the street. .they looked at each other.

"What d'you s'ppose that is?" Marshall asked.

Old Tom snorted.

"You oughta know th' answer t' that one," he retorted.

Marshall nodded.

"Jim Wade," he said quietly. He hitched up his gun belt, shifted the twin holsters a bit forward as Lewis watched. "Look, Tom, you hustle into th' house through th' back door. Keep Fran away fr'm th' windows, understand? An' that goes f'r you, too. If Wade's drunk, he's li'ble t' start blastin' away soon's he gets close enough an' in his c'ndition th' windows'll be what he'll hit.

"But you watch y'self, y'hear?"

Marshall smiled fleetingly.

"Don't worry about me," he answered. "I c'n take care o' myself awright, an' uv all th' Jim Wades you'll ever see. Go 'head."

TOM TRUDGED away. When he reached the back door and jerked it open, Marshall started up through the alley.

"Marshall!" he heard a thick, gruff voice yell. "Come outta there, you yeller-livered skunk! Come outta there an' get what's comin' to you!"

He was a dozen feet from the entrance to the alley when Jim Wade staggered by. Six or eight townsmen followed at a short distance behind him.

"Marshall!" he heard Jim roar again. "Come outta there, damn you, or I'm comin' in after you!"

He reached the end of the alley. . the townsmen had halted behind Jim; one of them spied Marshall. He nudged the man nearest him. .both paled, wheeled and backed away hastily. The others looked up wonderingly. .they too saw Marshall standing in the alley entrance, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. There was a sudden and general confusion. . in another minute Jim Wade stood alone. His companions halted their flight presently. .they separated, darted into nearby doorways and peered out.

"Marshall!" Jim roared at the very top of his liquor-thickened voice.

"Wa-al?" Marshall demanded curtly.

Jim stiffened. .he turned his head slowly, stared hard at the rigid black clad man. He blinked once or twice. . he took a single step forward, stopped, braced himself on widespread legs, squared his shoulders.

"Marshall," he began again. "I'm gonna kill you!"

"You better go sleep off that drunk b'fore you try it!" Marshall retorted. "You might have a chance then!"

Jim stumbled forward. He tripped mounting the curb, kept his feet somehow, miraculously, and stumbled on. Marshall did not move.

"Marshall!" a voice yelled. "Watch that polecat! He's on'y puttin' on that he's so drunk!"

It was Tom Lewis' voice and Marshall recognized it at once. Then a huge, plunging form leaped over the sidewalk. Marshall side-stepped, struck swiftly, a pile-driving, murderous blow that exploded in Jim Wade's face. It was a bone-crushing punch, a paralyzing blow that halted his onrush and left him dazed and tottering. Marshall leaped in again, struck him again.

Jim turned away slowly, a battered, bleeding hulk of a man. He stumbled awkwardly, blindly. . .he swayed drunkenly and fell sideways and rolled over. He was near the curb now. . .he dragged himself up to his knees, using his big hands and thick arms to prop himself up. He raised his head. .his right eye was closed; in fact, the entire right side of his face appeared battered and crushed. There was surprisingly little blood on his face, actually, little more than a trickle on his lips.

Slowly he focused his left eye on the tall, lean man who stood so motionlessly now, watching him. .suddenly Jim's right arm jerked backward. His gun cleared its holster. . he snapped it upward in a lightning motion, levelled it when a Colt thundered deafeningly, drowning out all other sounds. Jim's gun flamed, its report so puny by comparison. .the bullet ploughed harmlessly into the wooden sidewalk at a point about a yard beyond where Marshall was crouched amid a swirl of gently rising gunsmoke.

Jim's fingers opened and the gun slid out of his hand. .it dropped on the sidewalk within inches of his left hand. He tottered brokenly and his head came down. He lurched forward, struck on his face, rolled partly over on his back and lay still. The echo of gunfire seemed to linger in the air, spanning the length of the hushed street from one end to the other.

THERE was a sudden rush of booted feet, and two men came dashing up the street. One of them jerked out his gun and snapped a shot that went wild. .Marshall fired but once in reply. The second man stopped immediately, turned around in almost the same movement and fled. The man who had fired halted too. .his hat had been whisked off his head. He stared at it as it spun over the curb. .when it toppled over limply in the gutter, he leaped after it, caught it up and scampered back onto the sidewalk, whirled and plunged headlong into a nearby alley. Now other men emerged from their places of safety. .some of them started toward the outsprawled Jim Wade on the run. The bank door was suddenly flung open and Tom Lewis, rifle-armed, rushed out.

"Stay where y'are!" .he yelled and levelled his rifle threateningly.

The oncoming men skidded to a hesitant stop. Marshall glanced at them, then he holstered his gun. .he bent over Jim for a moment, and straightened up again.

"Tom!" he called.

Lewis came to his side at once, looked at him questioningly.

"Put your rifle inside," Marshall instructed him in a low tone. "Then come back here. Want you t' help me get him into th' bank."

"Huh?" Tom's eyes were wide. "What's th' idea?"

"Do's I say," Marshall said curtly. "We'll talk about it afterwards."

"Awright, on'y I think you're plumb loco," Tom flung over his shoulder as he strode away. .he returned in another moment without his rifle. "Need a dozen men t' carry that over-stuffed buff'lo."

"Never mind th' gab," Marshall snapped. "Take his feet."

Tom scowled darkly, however he obeyed. .he 'took' Jim's feet, then with Marshall doing the actual carry-

ing, they managed to get Jim into the bank. Fran, wide-eyed and white-faced, met them, came forward at once to hold the door for them.

"Close it," Marshall panted. "An' lock it."

Fran obeyed without a word of protest.

"Inside," Marshall breathed to Tom. "Put 'im on my bed."

Tom mumbled something under his breath, however his protests were confined to idle mutterings rather than to physical stoppages, and presently Jim Wade was laid out on Marshall's bed.

* * *

MIKE GALLO had witnessed the entire affair from his own doorway. When he saw Jim Wade drop his gun and pitch forward on his face, he was completely satisfied. He smiled, turned on his heel and went directly to the back room. .he emerged a minute later with his hat on his head and his coat slung over his arm. The bartender looked up questioningly.

"Keep 'n eye on things, Charley," Gallo instructed him.

"Sure, Boss."

"'Case I ain't back at midnight," Gallo continued, "Close up."

"Yeah, but what about th' dough in th' till?"

"I got it," Gallo answered.

"What about th' rest o' th' dough I'm gonna take in b'tween now an' closin' time?"

Gallo smiled coldly.

"T'day's payday, ain't it? Take that dough f'r your week's pay," he said and strode out.

Minutes later he led his horse out from behind the cafe. He mounted, settled himself in the saddle, gripped the reins and loped away.

CHAPTER X

Gallo Rides Again

IT WAS a clear, bright, starlit and moonlit night, with a brisk, freshening coolness in the air. Gallo's mount dashed along spiritedly, his hoof beats echoing over the shale upgrade that led to the Bar-O. Topping the grade Gallo could see yellowish lights on the lower floor of the ranchhouse, evidence that the Wades were still awake. He clattered past the bunkhouse, a low, squat, almost shapeless structure, distorted because it was in darkness, swung around the corral milling about. .now too he saw half a dozen figures perched on the top rail of the corral.

"Sure stay up late out here," he muttered to himself. He slackened his horse's pace when they came abreast of the late sitters. "Hi, there! Ed up at th' house?"

"Yep!" a voice answered. "An' who wants t' know?"

"Me!" Mike called over his shoulder as he spurred away. Presently he whirled up to the front porch, reined in, dismounted and started up the steps when the door opened and a burly, shirt-sleeved figure appeared in the doorway.

"Evenin', Ed," Gallo called.

"Huh?" Ed answered. Mike stopped on the top step, pushed his hat back from his eyes. Ed laughed. "O-h, h'llo, Mike! Thought you were Jim at first, then I knew it couldn't be. He was never that p'lite in his hull life. Don't b'lieve I ever heard him say 'good evenin'' t' anybody! Hey, what are you doin' out this way, huh?"

"Wanted t' see you."

"Uh-huh. I'm just tryin' t' r'call when you were out here last. Must be years now, Mike. Prob'bly when th' old man died. .right?"

"Yeah, reckon that's right, Ed."

Ed pushed the door open.

"Go 'head, Mike. Into th' kitchen. We c'n talk in there," he said.

They trooped into the house, reached the kitchen. .Ed closed the door behind him, nodded toward a chair at the table.

"Sit down."

Mike swung a chair away from the table, seated himself and looked up. Ed sat down on the opposite side of the table.

"Have a drink?" he asked. "It oughta be good. I got it fr'm you, y'know."

"Not right now."

Ed sat back in his chair.

"Whatever you say," he said. "How's tricks in Rainbow?"

"Could be better, heaps better."

"That Marshall feller still around?"

Gallo nodded mutely.

"SURE wish someb'dy would do me a big favor an' put a bullet in him where it'd do him th' most harm an' me th' most good," Ed said with a grin. He eyed Mike sharply. "What th' hell's th' matter with you. . huh?"

"Ed," Mike said heavily. "I gotta tell you somethin' an' I wish t' God I didn't hafta."

"What is it?"

"Wa-al, it's funny you wishin' just a minute ago that someb'dy'd take a shot at Marshall, b'cause someb'dy did."

Wade laughed lightly.

"On th' level? Who was it?" he demanded interestedly.

Gallo drew a deep breath.

"Jim," he said quietly and waited.

"Jim?" Ed repeated. "Th' hell he did! Why, that danged, locoed fool! He couldn't hit th' broad side uv a barn with a gun 'less he stood right on top uv it!"

"Wa-al, he tried t' do a job on Marshall, so you gotta give 'im credit f'r that."

"Yeah, I s'ppose so. But doggone it, Mike, I'd expect you t' stick up f'r Jim, f'r anybody f'r that matter. You're th' doggonedest feller! You allus see good in everybody, don't you?"

Gallo averted his eyes.

"Was that what you come all th' way out here t' tell me?" Ed asked. "O-h, I get it. You wanted t' tell me about it y'self so's I'd be calmed down by th' time Jim got home. Doggone you, Mike! You're awright an' I wish t' hell there were more like you!"

"There's more t' th' story, Ed."

"Then spill it, man! I c'n take it."

"I better b'gin fr'm th' b'ginning," Gallo said and Ed nodded. "Jim come into th' Star 'round evenin'. He had a couple o' drinks an' pretty soon his tongue got loosened up an' he nearly floored me by spoutin' out loud that he was out t' kill Marshall. 'Course I tried t' talk 'im outta th' idea, but you know how liquor c'n give a feller funny ideas."

"Go on, Mike."

"Wa-al, there wasn't any talkin' him outta what he'd cooked up," Gallo continued, "so I got 'n idea myself. I figgered that if he got good an' cockeyed, he'd f'rget th' hull thing. I give th' bartender th' eye an' when Jim finished one bottle, another one was set up for 'im. I even went upstairs an' fixed up a place f'r him t' sleep. I figgered he'd sleep off 'is drunk an' then by mornin' when he woke up, th' idea'd be gone."

ED NODDED approvingly.

"Uh-huh. What happened?"

"Th' place kinda busied up an' I turned away fr'm Jim f'r a couple o' minutes. Th' next thing I knowed he was out th' door an' headin' up th' street tow'rd th' bank."

Ed was silent. . .he waited for Mike to go on.

"Wa-al, I went after Jim but he had too much uv a lead on me. B'sides he musta run right smack into Marshall in th' street, judging by how fast things happened. Jim hauled off on Marshall but like I told you, Ed, he was pretty drunk an' Marshall walloped him plenty."

"Th' dirty skunk," Ed gritted. "Wallopin' a drunk who couldn't fight back!"

"Jim went down on 'is knees but he wasn't through. Nope, he had plenty o' guts, too much f'r 'is own good. He went f'r 'is gun, but Marshall beat 'im to th' draw an' blasted 'im."

Ed was on his feet now. His eyes were blazing.

"By God!" he stormed. "I'll kill 'im f'r that!"

Mike arose too. He pushed the chair closer to the table.

"Ed, Jim's dead," he said quietly.

"I figgered he was," Ed said heavily, "judgin' by th' way you led up to it."

Gallo breathed a sigh of relief.

"But I ain't blamin' you f'r any uv it, Mike," Ed added. "You done all you could an' mebbe more an' I won't f'rget it, b'lieve me."

"We're friends, Ed, an' friends are s'pposed t' do whatever they can an' whenever they get th' chance to."

"Yeah, I s'ppose so."

"Ed, now that you know 'bout Jim, what are you gonna do?"

"Dunno yet, Mike. 'Course I know there's actu'lly on'y one thing to do an' that is f'r me t' kill Marshall."

"But. . .?"

"He's a smart hombre. I can't afford t' leave anythin' t' chance. I gotta figger out all th' angles an' everything I'm gonna do so no matter what he does I'll be pr'pared f'r it."

"Uh-huh. Ord'narily I'd say that was th' on'y way t' tackle 'im."

"An' now?"

"No good."

"Awright. What's your idea?"

"Wa-al, this is th' way I'd figger it. Here Marshall's just killed your brother. He's smart like you say he is, so he knows you're gonna do somethin' about squarin' accounts with 'im an' pronto. He's worried an' jumpy. He's prob'bly stayin' up all night t'night an' every sound he hears, he figgers it's you."

"Go on."

"He'll prob'bly have a couple o' shots o' whiskey t' steady 'imself but by th' time mornin' comes rollin' around, he'll have finished a hull bottle full. He'll be so blamed bleary-eyed, he won't be fit f'r anything. It's common sense, Ed, leastways it is t' me, that worry, no sleep an' a good sized swig o' liquor thrown in every now an' then c'n do more t' ruin a feller an' quicker, too, th'n anything else you ever heard tell uv."

"S'ppose that's right, Mike. You figger that mornin' would be. . ."

"Nope," Gallo said, interrupting him. "Sun-up."

"Awright, sun-up."

"YEP," Mike said with finality. "He'll be at 'is worst at sunup, sleepier'n all hell. That's when you wanna tackle 'im. What's more, Ed, this is th' kind uva job that wants on'y one feller t' do it. So th' thing f'r you t' do is do it an' th' sooner th' better. Puttin' it off. . ."

"I don't aim t' put it off."

"Good f'r you. In that case. . ."

"I'm plannin' t' hit Rainbow t'morrow mornin' at sun-up," Ed concluded. "An' I'll be alone, too."

Gallo nodded. . .he turned and trudged to the door and opened it. Wade followed him out. . .they halted again presently when they reached the front door.

"G'night, Ed."

"G'night, Mike, an' thanks f'r everything."

"F'rget it," Gallo answered and went out.

He mounted slowly, heavily, with unusual and evidently purposeful deliberation, wheeled his horse away from the house, jogged toward the corral, circled it. There was no noisy milling about. . .the horses had quieted down; he could see them now, shadowy and almost indistinct, huddling together at the far end of the enclosure. He noticed at a glance that the late sitters had gone. . .he twisted around in the saddle and looked toward the bunkhouse. A dimmed light gleamed in its single window and cast a thin ray of yellowish light over the ground below it. The corral fell away behind him, and he shot a quick look over his shoulder.

A slim, cloaked figure appeared at that moment in a breathless, diagonal dash from the direction of the rear of the house.

"There she is," he muttered.

In another moment "she" spotted him and she swerved toward him. He drew rein and waited, eased himself in the saddle until she came panting up to him.

"Mike!" she said breathlessly.

"H'llo, Eadie," he answered. "I had a hunch you'd be wantin' t' see me after I left th' house, so I kinda moseyed along slow's I could t' give you a chance t' get out here ahead 'o me."

"You mean you knew I was. . ."

"Oh, sure!" he said laughingly. "I saw you standin' b'hind th' curtain b'tween th' kitchen an' th' parlor.

Fact o' th' matter is, Eadie, I spotted you standin' there th' minute I came in."

"Oh!"

"When I sat down," he continued, "I took th' chair facin' in your d'rection 'stead o' leavin' that one f'r Ed. He hadda walk 'round th' table t' get to th' other chair an' when he sat down he had 'is back t' you."

"I couldn't tell that, Mike, I didn't dare peek out."

"Uh-huh. What'd you wanna see me about, Eadie?"

"Does Ed know that I. . ."

"That it was you who rode into Rainbow an' warned Marshall that Jim was comin' f'r 'im? Nope."

"It was sweet of you, Mike, not to tell him that."

"An' if he ever finds it out, I'll tell 'im you came t' tell me about Jim so's I could try t' stop 'im. That'll satisfy 'im."

"O-h, Mike! You're an angel!"

"Oh, sure!" he said and laughed. "You'd better be getting' back t' th' house, Eadie. It's late. An' don't you go worryin' about anything. Y'hear?"

"Yes, Mike, and thanks loads."

"F'rget it. G'night!"

He spurred his horse and sent him dashing away into the night.

IT WAS three o'clock in the morning. Rainbow was hushed and gloomily dark. There was a sudden clatter of hoofs, then a lone horseman appeared and came loping down the street. He peered intently, sharply, in the night light at every store sign he passed. . .he halted his mount abruptly, wheeled and came jogging back, and pulled up in front of the bank. He dismounted stiffly. . .for a moment he looked up and down the street; when he seemed satisfied that he had aroused no one, he marched briskly across the sidewalk. He stopped at the door, reached for the knob. . .he checked himself, considered briefly, then he rapped on the door lightly. There was a minute-long wait. . .finally the door was opened.

"Smith!" Marshall greeted him in a low, guarded tone.

"Hi, feller!"

"Come alone?"

"Uh-huh. That's th' way you wanted it, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Figgered nob'dy'd think anything if they spotted you. A hull troop o' riders'd be sure t' 'rouse th' town an' then everyb'dy'd know what was cookin'," Marshall answered. "Hey! Where's Tom Lewis?"

"Who? Oh, y'mean th' ol' feller you sent t' get me? Heck, he was so plumb tuckered out after that long ride, I made 'im stay put f'r th' rest o' th' night. He'll prob'bly be showin' up later on or soon's he feels up t' ridin' back. S-ay, don't a feller get invited inside?"

"Sure, Smith," Marshall said quickly. "Figgered we'd do our talkin' out here first, then we'll go in an' see what we c'n do with Wade."

"Oh, I get it. You think th' polecat'll open up?"

"Yeah, I think he will."

"Awright. What's th' set-up?"

"Wa-al, I got 'n idea th' minute he knows he's up against Ranger law, he's gonna bust wide open. While he's stewin' in his own juice, you an' me c'n kinda jaw a lot about barg-in' 'im. You c'n be stiff an' hard w[illegible] I'll try t' proposition you on a [illegible] f'r him if he talks. How's that [illegible] t' you?"

"Awright I guess, Marsh. Anyway, it's worth a try."

"Then let's go inside."

Smith Jenkins stepped into the bank. He closed the door behind him noiselessly, then he followed Marshall through darkened rooms. . .he blinked and slackened his pace when they came into light.

"Here's your man, Smith," he heard Marshall say.

They were in a small room. There were two cots in it, with a single chair between them. In the middle of the room was a table and a lighted lamp on top of it. On one cot lay a bulky, blanket-covered man with a scowl on his face and a blood-stained bandage wound around his head. He glared at the newcomer who eyed him coldly, disdainfully.

"This is Jim Wade," Marshall said presently. "I dunno f'r sure yet whether he's lucky my bullet on'y

clipped 'is head an' left 'im alive so's th' law c'n hang 'im, or not."

JENKINS moved closer to the big man and looked down at him. . . Jim's eyes widened suddenly. He had spied the gold badge on Smith's shirt-front and now he was staring at it.

"So you're Jim Wade, eh?" Smith used. m[illegible]ou. . .a Ranger?"

"Y[illegible]ins nodded grimly.

Jenk[illegible] he said curtly. "Lieuten-"Yep," ant."

Wade's [illegible] strangely white. In the yellow lamp lig[illegible]ht it was pasty.

"Awright, Marshall!" Sm[illegible]ith said. "Let's get him up on 'is feet an[illegible]be on our way!"

"Where. . .where you takin' [illegible]ne?" Jim asked in a hollow, unfamili[illegible]ar voice.

"To a hangin'!" Smith snapped in reply. "Yours!"

Jim gulped and swalloed hard.

"Wait a minute, Jenkins!" Marshall said quickly. "Can't we make some kind o' deal f'r him?"

"Th' law don't make deals f'r killers an' bank robbers!"

"Yeah," Marshall said. "I know that. But, doggone it, man, this is diff'rent."

"Not th' way I see it," Smith retorted. "This feller an' 'is brother've been raisin' all kinds o' hell 'round these parts f'r a long time. Now we've caught up with 'im an' he'll hafta pay f'r th' things he's done."

"Wa-al," Marshall began slowly. "S'ppose he wants t' do somethin' decent?"

Jenkins' lip curled scornfully.

"He wouldn't know how!" he said coldy.

"You don't understand," Marshall said quickly. "S'ppose he wants t' face th' law with a clear conscience? S'ppose he wants t' tell everything he knows?"

"Let 'im!"

"If he does, what'll you do f'r him in r'turn?"

"Look, Marshall," Smith said with finality. "I dunno what th' hell you're drivin' at. What's more, I ain't int'rested. But I'm allus willin' t' give everybody a fair shake. If this feller's got somethin' t' say an' if he starts talkin' th' minute I'm finished an' comes through with everything he knows. . ."

"Yeah? What then?"

"I won't make 'ny promises. All I'll say is that I'll talk up f'r 'im where it'll do 'im good."

"There y'are, Wade," Marshall said, turning to him. "It's up t' you now. You're gettin' a helluva better break th'n you deserve. So now you better start talkin' or. . ."

"He'll hang!" Smith concluded and turned away.

Jim Wade gulped again, loudly and painfully. . .and swallowed hard.

"Wa-al?" Marshall demanded impatiently.

"Awright," Jim wheezed. "What d'you want me t' tell you?"

CHAPTER XI

The Good Samaritan

THE FIRST gray light of dawn pierced the dull sky, and the last lingering night shadows var[illegible]ished. The air was chilly and a swift, noisy breeze droned through Rainbow, swirling dust in its wake. Mike Gallo appeared in the doorway of his cafe. He looked eastward anxiously, listened intently and finally shook his shoulder.

"Hope t' hell he don't get cold feet," he muttered to himself. "That'd sure be one helluva note, just when I got things fixed."

He heard a hoof beat and he dashed into the street. . .a horseman came whirling into view. Gallo's heart pounded wildly. It was Ed Wade and Mike's anxiety vanished.

"He's come awright!" he told himself delightedly. "He's come!"

Wade slackened his horse's pace for a moment. . .he spied Gallo and he rode forward again, guiding his mount to where Mike was awaiting him. He clattered up, and reined in.

"Got here like I said I would," he said simply.

"Uh-huh," Gallo answered. "Better climb down now, Ed."

"Huh? Why?"

"I figger it might be better if I was t' go take a look first," Gallo explained. "Wanna see if Marshall's around an' what he's doin'. I don't aim t' let you get shot up like Jim was. Anyway, soon's I know it's awright, I'll come back f'r you an' you c'n go 'head an' do what you gotta. Get th' idea?"

"Yeah, sure, Mike," Ed replied. He swung himself out of the saddle. "Want me t' wait here?"

"N-o," Gallo said. "Take your horse 'round th' back o' my place, then you c'n wait f'r me just inside th' alleyway. Might be a good idea f'r you t' stay outta sight c'mplete 'till it's time f'r you t' come out in th' open."

Ed nodded in agreement.

"Whatever you say, Mike. You're runnin' this thing an' you sure seem t' know what's t' be done. Awright, I'll go 'round t' th' back an' meet you in th' alley."

They turned as one. . . Wade led his horse onto the sidewalk, then he disappeared into the alley that led to the lean-to behind the cafe; Gallo strode briskly down the street, crossing diagonally to the opposite side, then continuing until he reached the bank. He halted in front of it, turned and looked up the street for a brief moment, then he wheeled and marched into the alley that flanked the bank. He quickened his pace, whirled around the building to the back door and knocked on it impatiently. There was a brief wait. . . presently he heard a heavy step inside, a key grated in the lock and a bolt was drawn back, then the door was opened. Marshall, his hand on his gun butt, eyed him questioningly.

"OH, IT'S you, eh?"

"Yep, an' I gotta see you 'bout somethin'."

Marshall frowned with annoyance.

"Kinda early t' be out visitin', ain't it?" he asked.

"I didn't come here t' pay you a visit," he said a bit sharply. "I'm here b'cause I figgered you oughta know that Ed Wade's in town."

Marshall's eyebrows arched.

"Ed Wade, eh?" he repeated thoughtfully and frowned again.

"I don't s'ppose I hafta tell you what he's here for," Gallo added.

"Nope," Marshall said grimly. "That's one thing I c'n figger out f'r myself."

"That's what I thought."

There was a brief silence.

"Where's he at?"

"Down at my place. I slipped away first chance I got so's I could hustle up here an' tell you 'bout it."

"Uh-huh. What's he doin', drinkin'?"

"Nope," Gallo . He's cold sober."

"Wa-al, thanks f'r th' tip, Gallo." The cafe owner grinned fleetingly. "F'rget it. I just don't aim t' have anything that I c'n pr'vent happen to you. That's all."

"I don't either," Marshall replied.

"Look, Marshall, Ed'll be heaps diff'rent th'n Jim was. I mean you'll hafta handle Ed diff'rent."

"I don't get that."

"Wa-al, what I was tryin' t' say was that Ed's smart. Just give him th' slightest break an' you'll be deader'n all hell. He's damned good with a six-gun, fast, an' what's worse, tricky."

"Y'mean I'll hafta watch 'im every minute o' th' time I'm near 'im. That th' idea?"

"On'y part uv it. My idea is t' cut loose with them Colts o' yourn th' minute he comes close enough. He's out t' kill you an' I don't see why'n hell you should give 'im even th' slightest chance t' draw. Get 'im while th' gettin' is good an' you'll be done with th' Wades f'r good."

"I see."

"B'lieve me, Marshall, I know what I'm talkin' about. Th' Wades were never ones t' give th' other feller a break. That's why Boot Hill's so danged overcrowded now with other fellers. You do like they done an' they'll be plantin' you there, too."

"You figger Ed's gonna come after me?" Marshall asked.

"I know he is," Gallo answered quickly. "I heard 'im say so."

"Uh-huh."

'But that's a br'eak f'r you right off," Gallo went on. "He's gotta come t' you an' you c'n start blastin' away at him th' minute he reaches here.

Hell, you c'n be b'hind somethin' an' he'll hafta spot you b'fore he c'n start shootin' back at you."

MARSHALL listened attentively. . . .he looked at Gallo, quietly studying the big man. He made no comment, waited instead for Gallo to continue.

"So there y'are," Mike concluded. "You know what you're facin'. You know what you gotta do an' th' best way t' do it. When it's done, mebbe then we c'n have s'me peace 'round these parts."

"Awright, Gallo, an' thanks again f'r tippin' me off."

"Never mind th' thanks. Just r'member that it's your life or Ed Wade's an' act accordin'.

"I intend to."

Gallo nodded, turned abruptly and strode around the building. Marshall heard the big man's quick step in the alley. . .in another minute it faded away completely.

Ed Wade, a big, tight-lipped man with quick, anxious eyes and a nervous, tensed impatience about him, was waiting in the alley-way when Gallo came striding in from the street. Ed looked up quickly and came forward at once.

"Awright?" he asked.

"Yep!" Gallo panted in answer.

Wade nodded. He hitched up his belt mechanically, jerked out his gun as Mike watched, palmed it expertly and fanned it skillfully, then he slipped the weapon back into its holster. Gallo grinned.

"That's awright, Ed!" he said admiringly. "You're even faster with a gun th'n I figgered. I got 'n idea this is gonna be easier'n you're willin' t' b'lieve."

Wade did not answer. He shifted his holster a bit until the butt of his gun was directly below his fingers.

"You see 'im?" he asked.

Mike nodded mutely.

"How'd he look? Like you figgered he would?"

"Huh? O-h, sure! He looked like somethin' that rode into town on th' buckin' tail uva cyclone!"

Ed grinned fleetingly.

"Think he had a tough night, eh?"

"An' how!' Gallo answered. "Tryin' t' stay awake an' hittin' th' bottle at th' same time, wa-al, you c'n imagine what he looks like. You'll see f'r y'self soon enough. You oughta get goin', Ed."

'Yeah, in a minute. Which way d'you think I oughta bust in on 'im, Mike, fr'm th' back?"

"Heck, no!" Gallo said quickly. "Go in through th' front door. He won't be expectin' you t' bust in that way an' you'll take 'im by s'prise."

"Uh-huh."

"An' start shootin' th' minute you get inside an' see anythin' that looks like him. Don't f'rget that!"

Ed grinned again, lightly.

"You ever hear o' me givin' a skunk a break?" he asked.

Gallo laughed softly and patted him on the back.

"Nope," he replied. "Never. Now go ahead, Ed. Go get 'im an' when you come back we'll celebrate."

Wade hitched up his belt again, squared his shoulders.

"Be seein' you," he said and trudged out to the street.

* * *

ED WADE was twenty feet from the bank when the door opened and Marshall emerged. Ed halted abruptly. His hand dropped instantly to his gun butt. Marshall, his hands dangling at his sides, stepped into the gutter, turned and looked up. Ed seemed uncertain, even hesitant. . . then his right arm jerked suddenly. His gun flashed in his hand. . . the muzzle cleared the thick leather lip of his holster and snapped upward. He fired and the rolling echo of gunfire filled the air, ranged the length of the street; there was an answering roar and the echo swelled mightily for an instant, burst and started to fade, leaving in its wake a curious, muffled rumbling that sounded like distant summer thunder. Then in another moment the rumbling too had gone.

Ed staggered. . . he braced himself with an effort, even squared his shoulders. His gun came down now and slid out of his hand, dropped

limply into the gutter. He turned clumsily, managing to keep his feet when it appeared that he would fall, started up the street at a stumbling, faltering, foot-dragging pace. He swerved blindly toward the curb, mounted it and stopped. Again he braced himself. . . now he went on. He reached an alley, turned into it, disappeared. A minute later he reappeared, stumbled out, his hands clutching at his chest. He sagged and crumpled and fell on his hands and knees. . . he stiffened and pitched forward on his face.

There was a sudden banging of doors and presently men with tousled heads and sleep-reddened eyes peered out. Marshall, his gun holstered, came striding up the street. Men eyed him. . . others stared at the limp, outsprawled figure on the sidewalk. Half a dozen men stepped out into the street. . . when Marshall passed them, they fell in behind him silently, followed at his heels. He stopped beside Ed, looked down at him. . . another man dropped to one knee, bent over Wade and turned him over on his broad back. There two wide, soggy blood stains on Ed's shirt-front. The man nodded. . . he looked up presently, caught Marshall's eye and nodded again.

"Got 'im plumb center, Mister," he said and climbed to his feet. "Your first shot on'y winged 'im, prob'bly busted 'is shoulder. But th' second one done th' trick awright, drilled 'im clean through th' heart."

THERE WAS a frown on Marshall's face. His eyes ranged over the faces of the men around him. . he turned, stopped when he heard the pounding of running feet, looked back over his shoulder. He saw Mike Gallo coming down the street on the run. But he did not wait. . . he shouldered his way out of the circle of men and strode away. He was within a dozen feet of the bank when the door was flung open and Tom Lewis, his rifle gripped in one hand, and his pants held up by the other, dashed out.

"Hey!" Tom yelled and skidded to a stop. He looked at Marshall, then past him. . . after a moment he looked up at Marshall again and grinned. "Reckon that's that, eh?"

"Yep," Marshall answered. "Ed Wade's dead."

"Sure looks like it fr'm here," Tom said and he laughed softly. "Y'know, Marshall, I've hated that polecat ever since I c'n r'member. I've allus hoped I'd be on hand when he got what was comin' to 'im. I wanted t' be right there to see him stop a bullet in 'is gizzard, wanted t' see 'im suffer like he made others suffer. But I don't feel bad about it now, I mean about not bein' on hand t' see how it happened to 'im. Long's I know he's dead an' that it was you who done it, I . . . . . "

"I didn't do it, Tom," Marshall said, interrupting him. 'I hate t' dis'ppoint you but someb'dy else did th' job."

The old man stared hard at him.

"Huh? What was that?" he demanded. "Gimme that again."

"I said I didn't kill him," Marshall said patiently. "Someb'dy else did."

"I. . . I don't get it."

"That makes two uv us that don't get it," Marshall said grimly. "I fired at 'im, awright, an' I know I hit 'im. But I on'y fired once an' I hit 'im in th' shoulder. I wanted t' get him alive, not dead, but someb'dy else had diff'rent ideas an' beat me to 'im."

"An' there's another hole in 'im b'side yourn?" Tom asked.

Marshall nodded.

"Right over th' heart," he replied.

"Wonder who else had th' guts t' go after 'im?"

"While you're figgerin' that one out," Marshall said dryly, "try your hand at th' next question. There were on'y two shots fired, leastways that's all I heard, Wade's an' mine. I not on'y didn't hear th' shot that killed Wade, but I'm doggoned if I c'n even figger out where it come fr'm. Mebbe you c'n figger it out for me. Tom. I can't. I'm stumped an' I mean it."

"Wait a minute!" Tom commanded. "Lemme get th' picture set in m' mind. Did you see 'nybody?"

"Nope. That is, nob'dy but Gallo an' that was when he come t' warn me that Ed was here. But Gallo went

back t' his place an' then th' next time I saw 'im it was after th' killin' an' then Gallo was runnin' down th' street t' where Wade was layin'. That lets him out. He couldn'ta done it."

Tom turned away.

"C'mon," he said over his shoulder. "Let's go fix us s'me breakfast. I'm doggoned hungry."

CHAPTER XII

The Sum Total

OLD TOM LEWIS idled in the doorway between the bank and the living quarters, watching Fran as she swept the bank floor.

"Y'know," he mused. 'It's doggoned funny 'bout Marshall. Y'know that. Fran?"

"Funny?" she repeated without looking up. "What do you mean?"

"Wa-al, I went down th' street with 'im a while ago an' I'm doggoned if every woman we passed, young an' old alike, too, didn't turn aroun' an' give 'im th' eye."

"Really?"

"Yep. I s'ppose there is somethin' about 'im that makes women folks do like they do when he comes along. There must be. I ain't never noticed 'specially, but I s'ppose t' them he's kind o' nice lookin'."

"I think he's a very good looking man."

"Uh-huh. Then too he's big an' carries 'imself. . . . "

"Like an athlete, Tom, and all women want their men to look like that."

"Yeah, I s'ppose that's right, Fran. But I'll say this much f'r him. . . he didn't give any o' th'm a tumble."

She did not answer. . . he watched her out of the corner of his eye, saw a fleeting smile toy at the corners of her mouth.

"Bet there'll be a heap o' busted hearts 'round these parts when he pulls up stakes an' moves on," he mused again.

Fran looked up quickly. Tom saw at once that the smile had gone.

"Has he. . . has he said anything about that to you?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Nope. I'm just readin' th' signs. That's all."

"Oh!" she said quickly, relief in her voice.

"He ain't th' kind t' stay put around a hole like Rainbow," he went on doggedly. "He's too big f'r us. He oughta be runnin' one o' them big ranches like they got in Texas an' other places. Just you watch an' see if I ain't right about him pullin' outta here one o' these days. There's nuthin' f'r 'im here an' there never will be."

She smiled quietly, confidently.

"And yet, Tom," she said, "he might find something in Rainbow to hold his interest. Something no one else even suspects. He might, you know."

Tom shook his head.

"I wouldn't count on that a-tall," he said with finality. "That feller's meant f'r bigger things th'n Rainbow c'n ever offer 'im, an' 'less I miss my guess c'mplete, Fran, he's gonna get th'm."

"Perhaps. Tom, do you remember what Dad used to say about the grass being greener in the other fellow's yard?" she asked.

Tom grinned sheepishly.

"He used t' say s' many things I ain't sure that I r'member that partic'lar one," he replied. "What was it?"

"'Clover, Dad said, was where you found it'."

"Huh?"

'That means that a man doesn't have to leave his own backyard to find the things he wants most. I believe that, Tom. Usually, those very things are right there, simply waiting for him to realize that they are there. Sometimes, of course, some one else has to point them out to him, however, eventually he discovers their existence, one way or another."

Tom suddenly straightened up.

"We're gettin' comp'ny," he said.

The street door opened as Fran turned. In the open doorway stood a pretty, smiling young woman. Tom stared at her, gulped and swallowed . . . hastily he backed out of sight, wheeled and fled.

"Hello."

Fran eyed her. . . the newcomer in turn eyed Fran; she seemed to focus her eyes first on the broom in Fran's hand, then on the torn towel she had wound around her hair to protect it from the dust. Fran followed the young woman's eyes and frowned.

"Yes?"

"I'm looking for someone. . . a man."

"Indeed!" Fran said sarcastically.

"His name is Marshall. I understand he lives here."

"That's right. . . he does live here.'

"We-ll, is he here now, or can you tell me where I might find him?"

"Is he expecting you?" Fran countered.

"Oh, no!" the other said quickly. "I thought I'd just run in on him and surprise him."

"In that case," Fan said frigidly, "I'm afraid I can't help you very much. However, if you care to leave your name or a message. . . "

"No, I don't think I ought to do that. Actually, he might not approve of my coming here at all. Of course, if he were here now. . . "

Fran frowned again. Suddenly she recalled what Tom had told her earlier. . . of the women on the street who had turned and looked so brazenly at Marshall. Her eyes glinted. . . she was certain that this young woman was one of them. "Perhaps then," she said coldly, "it's just as well that he isn't here now."

"O-h, really?"

"Yes," Fran went on. "Since you won't leave any word for him, and since you seem to doubt that he would be pleased to see you here, perhaps it would be best if you didn't come back. I'm sure if he were anxious to see you he would know how to get in touch with you."

"I see," the young woman said slowly. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a very impertinent person? Actually, you act as if you owned him and made up his mind for him. You sound like a wife, or however a nasty-tongued wife is supposed to sound."

Fran's eyes blazed.

"I'm not at all interested in your opinion of me," she said furiously. "But I do think you'd have more pride than to run after a man and try to force yourself upon him. There are several cafes and saloons down the street. You might try them. I'm sure you'd have greater success there. The men who frequent those places are doubtless better suited to you and your style. You'll excuse me, please. I'm very busy."

Fran turned away and began to ply her broom vigorously. . . she heard the door close and she smiled to herself. There was a hesitant, cautious step in the connecting doorway and she looked up. It was Tom Lewis.

"She. . . she gone?" he asked in a guarded tone.

"Yes!" Fran said and she laughed. "Why, that brazen thing! The nerve of her, coming here after Marshall! But she won't come here again, believe me!"

'Y'mean, you. . . . " his voice trailed away weakly.

She laughed again, lightly.

"As you would say, Tom, I 'told her off'!"

He sank back against the door jamb.

"She was just one of those women you told me about, the ones who ogled Marshall on the street."

He struggled, forced himself upright again with an effort.

"Fran. . . . "

"Yes?"

"It wasn't your fault," he sputtered. "It was all mine an' I oughta get kicked clear outta town. Y'see, I was tryin' t' lead up t' her on'y I just couldn't seem t' get to it without hurtin' you."

"What do you mean?"

"Fran, she wasn't one o' them women a-tall."

Her eyes widened. . . she caught her breath as she waited for him to continue.

"She. . . wasn't?"

"'Course not! She's Marshall's wife! Doggone an' damnation!"

* * *

THE STAR CAFE was deserted when Marshall halted in front of

it and peered in. . . he spied Mike Gallo standing behind the bar and sauntered inside. Gallo looked up.

"H'llo, Marshall," he said and added a smile. "You're just th' feller I've been waitin' t' see. Kinda hoped you'd come by so's we could have a drink t'gether t' sort o' celebrate. This is a big day f'r Rainbow an' an even bigger one f'r me, now that Ed Wade's gone, an' that sure calls f'r some kind o' celebration. An' bein' that you're th' feller r'sponsible f'r it all, th' Star's standin' treat." . . .

He bent down. . . when he straightened up again, he had a bottle of whiskey in his hand. He uncorked it and placed it on the bar, followed it with two glasses.

"There y'are," he said and smiled again. "It's my own stuff so you don't hafta be afraid uv it. Go on, man. . pour your own."

Marshall did not move. He stood erect, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. Gallo eyed him questioningly.

"S'matter?" he asked.

"Nuthin' much," Marshall replied. "But s'ppose we cut out th' horsin' around about celebrations an' talk turkey. You know well's I do, Gallo, that I didn't kill Ed Wade."

The cafe owner's eyes did not waver.

"Awright," he said quietly. "I killed 'im."

"That's what I figgered," Marshall said calmly.

Gallo was grim-faced now, and tight-lipped.

"Sure I killed Ed," he repeated. "An' I'm glad I did. I've hated his guts f'r years on'y there wasn't anything I could do about it 'cept wait an' hope f'r a chance t' come along so's I could pay 'im off. Wa-al, I got th' chance an' he got what was comin' to 'im. Reckon that's about all there was to it."

Marshall nodded understandingly.

"Uh-huh," he said. "Y'know, Gallo, at first I was plumb stopped. I coulda sworn there were on'y two shots fired, Ed's an' mine. But when I got a quick look at 'im layin' out there in th' street an' found there were two wounds in 'im 'stead o' one, I couldn't figger it out. I didn't hear 'ny third shot an' what was worse, there wasn't anybody aroun' f'r me t' blame it on."

Gallo smiled fleetingly.

"Th' blood covered up both wounds an' I didn't think o' lookin' t' see if both o' th'm were bullet wounds. Reckon I just took it f'r granted that

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they were an' let it go at that. It was on'y afterwards when I got t' thinkin' about it again that I d'cided I'd better have another look at 'im. I'd heard they'd toted Ed down t' th' Sheriff's office an' I went down there an' took a second look at 'im. Then I knew I wasn't wrong. There wasn't 'ny third shot. What killed Ed was a knife jab straight into 'is heart."

Gallo's smile had vanished.

"Go on," he said briefly.

"Th' funny thing about it," Marshall continued, "was th' fact that even though I knew what'd killed 'im, I was still just as far away fr'm figgerin' out who it was that killed 'im as I was in th' b'ginnin'. Ord'narily, y'know, one thing allus leads to another. But in this case it was diff'rent. There wasn't any trail t' follow."

THERE WAS no comment from Gallo, no movement of any kind. He was motionless. . . his eyes were focused on Marshall's face.

"I went over th' hull thing in my mind, fr'm th' beginnin' right down t' th' end, an' th' on'y one I allus came back to was you, Gallo. Not that that helped 'ny. What made me wind up with you was th' fact that you'd come t' warn me about Ed an' how you'd s'ggested that I start blastin' away at 'im th' minute I saw 'im an' so on. Somehow that made some kind o' tie-up b'tween you an' th' killin' on'y I couldn't figger out what it was. What threw me off alt'gether was seein' you come runnin' down th' street. I couldn't understand how you could've killed Ed, hustled back t' your place an' then come gallopin' back down th' street again all inside uv a couple o' minutes or mebbe less."

Gallo laughed softly.

"But somehow, everything allus seems t' come out in th' wash. It came t' me all uva sudden. You must've slipped outta here right after Ed did, on'y you worked your way down toward th' bank through th' backyards. You hopped into that alley an' as luck would have it, Ed came stumblin' past there. You must've called to 'im, otherwise I don't think he'da gone in there. Anyway he went in an' you knifed 'im."

Marshall paused and moistened his lips, then he went on again.

"Mebbe he fell down, mebbe he didn't, not that it makes 'ny diff'rence either way 'cept that it took 'im more'n a full minute t' come outta there. That gave you time t' run like hell through th' yards, then you came out t' th' street again through still another alley further up th' street. You didn't go back t' your place Gallo. You on'y made it look that way an' I was dumb enough t' fall f'r it."

"Awright," Gallo said. "That's close enough t' th' way it happened. So what? I killed th' polecat an' I've admitted it, ain't I? I had damned good reason f'r doin' it an' no jury in th' world'd c'nvict me f'r it."

"You had a better reason f'r killin' Ed," Marshall said quietly, "same's you ha'd f'r wantin' 'Jim Wade killed off."

"Yeah? What was that?"

"Y'see, Gallo," Marshall continued, "you hadda miss up somewhere's. Jim ain't dead. He's in jail."

"No!"

"I say he is. Th' Rangers've got 'im. An' he talked, Gallo, heaps. He spilled th' beans 'bout th' bank robbery an' told us. . . ."

"Us?" Gallo echoed. "Y'mean you too? Then you're a Ranger an' not just on th' loose, lookin' f'r a job or somethin'?"

"That's right," Marshall answered. "Jim told us that th' bank money was buried down b'low here under th' floor an' that you were keepin' it for th'm. You wanted both Jim an' Ed outta th' way so's you could have th' money f'r y'self. Reckon that's th' hull story, Gallo, an' you're gonna swing f'r it, leastways f'r th' murder o' Ed Wade. You'd better come out fr'm b'hind there. You an' me are goin' f'r a ride."

Gallo smiled. . . his white, even teeth flashed in his swarthy face. He brushed a speck of dust from the lapel of his coat. . . he whirled suddenly and a knife gleamed in his hand, then he threw it. A Colt

thundered deafeningly. Gallo staggered, fell against the shelf behind the bar and a dozen bottles crashed to the floor. He stumbled away, reached the end of the bar, braced himself on it and raised his head. He stiffened suddenly, turned halfway and crashed headlong to the floor. Marshall watched him for a moment, then he turned his head and looked at the wooden post behind him. A long knife quivvered in the post barely an inch above his head.

* * *

THE THREE horses halted when they reached the top of the hill and their riders twisted around and looked down into Rainbow for the last time.

"S'matter, Marsh?" Smith Jenkins asked with a grin. "Wanna go back an' take that Sheriff's job there?"

"No, thanks," Marshall answered quickly. "I've had all I want o' Rainbow. Th' Wades are where they won't do 'ny more harm, Mike Gallo's planted right 'longside o' Ed an' Fran's got th' bank's money back again."

"Yeah, you sure did all th' Gov'nor wanted you t' do an' then some," Jenkins commented. "Still he's gonna be sore when I tell 'im you're done an' finished with th' Rangers."

"But he agreed that this was to be Ned's last Ranger mission," Carol said quickly. "He asked us to postpone our trip to California just long enough for Ned to clean up Rainbow and now that that's done, we're California bound, the Governor not withstanding."

"S-ay, Marsh," Smith said. "Them two girls standin' in front o' th' bank. They watched us all th' way up here. Know th'm?"

"Yeah, sure," Marshall answered. "Th' taller one's Fran Grant an' th' other one's Eadie Wade. They'll probably be good friends again now that Fran's got her money back an' Eadie's got not on'y th' dough ol' man Wade left 'er but Jim's an' Ed's, too. Carol, Im sure sorry you didn't meet Fran an' Eadie, 'specially Fran. You an' she would've hit it off swell t'gether."

Carol and Smith Jenkins looked at each other quickly and exchanged winks.

"Yeah," Jenkins drawled. "I'll bet they would've, too."

They turned in their saddles as one and rode westward.

(THE END)

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By Lee Floren

Funeral O'Neill, the Boxelder undertaker, and his sidekick, Ringbone Smith, return in this salty tale by the author of the "Judge Bates" and the "Buck McKee" stories.

HE WAS A thin, elderly man and now, somewhere in these mountains covered with pine and buckbrush, he was lost. And to make matters worse, rain was sweeping heavily across the Little Rockies. Rain that threatened any minute to turn into snow and the first late fall blizzard.

Gaunt Funeral O'Neill, the Boxelder undertaker, cursed under his breath, his predatory face showing fatigue. He turned in saddle, glared through the evening darkness at his partner, stubby Ringbone Smith.

"Hell of a weather for a man to ride abroad, Ringbone! Why would old Prof Jimmy Faulcon pick such a terrible storm to get lost in? Well, night's comin' on, an' we lost the track we were following back yonder. . ."

The veterinary, c h e r u b i c face aglow from the elements, dug into his slicker pocket, came out with a red peppermint. "He's been gone almost a week, Funeral," he said, thoughtfully. "Wonder if he still breaths the Lord's good air."

Funeral O'Neill sat his tired horse, and looked over the terrain. Out there beyond the pelting rain was buckbrush and wild rosebushes and whispering pines. . .And back yonder the trail had petered out and—Suddenly he tensed.

"You hear that, Ringbone?"

Ringbone Smith said, "Sure did, Funeral. . .Sounded like the call of a man. Low, though—"

"Hello, there," called Funeral, cupping his lips. "Funeral O'Neill talking!"

The call rang out, lingered across the brush, then died. Save for the pelting rain on their slickers, silence held the mountains. Now through this silence they heard the thin voice again.

"Funeral—Ringbone—This way—"

Already the pair had dismounted, already they were going down the ledge. Sliding in muddy talus, they

broke through the brush, came to a small rocky clearing. There, under an overthrust, they saw the man. Prof Faulcon lay in a limp, muddy heap.

Funeral and Ringbone knelt beside him. "Dang it, prof," murmured the undertaker, "we figured you was a goner." Then his throat constricted as he saw the bonds. Rawhide thongs held the professor's hands behind him. Another, trussed about his throat, had almost cut his jugular.

"He's passed out," said Ringbone, softly.

Funeral's skinning-knife severed the rawhides. Rain had softened the whang, making it slick and thinning it out. While Ringbone pillowed the professor's gray head on a nearby rock, Funeral studied the rawhide bonds. And in the lanky, homely undertaker rose a great anger.

"Somebody's captured the prof," he said quietly. "They've wet rawhide and tied it around his throat and wrists." He rolled back the man's muddy, wet pant-legs. "Yes, they've even tied his feet. They've put him in a dry spot and let the rawhide dry out and contract. They've tried to choke him, Ringbone. He's untied his feet some how and got this far."

Their glances met across the limp, unconscious form. And when Ringbone Smith spoke, the veterinary's husky voice was soft. "I'm getting the man, or the men, that did this to prof, Funeral!"

"But why did they?"

Methodically Ringbone went through the professor's pockets. A jackknife, a handkerchief. And in the coat pocket, a few bits of shattered pottery. He handed the pottery to Funeral.

"Mimbres pottery," said the undertaker. "Hell, that pottery came originally from New Mexico, if I remember my college anthropology! Now what would Mimbres pottery be doin' in Montana?"

Ringbone Smith shrugged. "We better be gettin' prof into civilization."

FUNERAL cradled the pedant in his arms, carried him to their horses. Ringbone taking the lead, Funeral holding the prof across the front of his saddle, they rode down the mountain, horses sliding and slipping. Prof Jimmy Faulcon's head lopped back, disclosing the raw marks left by the rawhide thong. Funeral felt a constriction in his throat.

Years before, at the state university, Prof Faulcon had had Funeral and Ringbone as students, and between these three had grown an enduring friendship. Whenever aging Prof Faulcon passed through Boxelder, he always stopped off for a visit. The week before he had arrived unexpectedly and said he was going into Little Rockies to search for Mimbres pottery.

"Mimbres pottery?" Funeral had looked amazed. "That's a pottery made in New Mexico eons ago. The local Indians don't make pottery. They use skins for water bags."

But Prof Faulcon had shook his gray head. "One of my friends, a local Indian, mailed me some bits of pottery he had just found, out in the Little Rockies. I was amazed to find it was of the Mimbres family."

"Now how," asked Funeral, "did that get up north?"

"That," said the pedant, "is what I intend to find out. If I find enough pottery, I can prove that once, ages ago, trade occurred between the Northern Indians and the Southern tribes. And thereby smash to smithereens Doctor Smithers' theory."

Funeral smiled. "You two ol' coots still battling?"

"A purely friendly argument," smiled the professor.

Funeral and Ringbone had watched him ride off, leading his packhorse. And misgivings had filled both of them. Fall and snow would soon turn their fury loose on the pine-covered rocks and ridges. And Prof Faulcon must have been pressing seventy pretty close. Ringbone had voiced his fears.

"I've thought the same," Funeral had murmured, "but the old coot is so headstrong he wouldn't let anybody go with him. . ."

Days had run out, stretched into a week. And still no word came from the archeologist. Two days before

the rain had started. Now, riding down the mountain, Funeral wondered who had tried to kill the professor. The rawhide thongs around the throat, and the cruelty of the setup, pointed to the work of Indians. The Gros Ventres had, in their savage days, killed prisoners that way. Wrapped their throats with wet rawhide, placed them in the sun, watched the rawhide dry out and constrict, and choke their victims to death.

But the local Indians had been peaceful lately.

THEY headed for the Hawkins' ranch, about eight miles away on the road to Boxelder. From there a rider could go in for the doctor. When they came out of the pines, there at the foot of the mountain, a rider rode out of the brush toward them. He was a thin-shouldered man wearing a yellow oilskin slicker. His eyes, greenish-brown slits, regarded the partners from under the flappy, rain-soaked Stetson.

"Howdy, Funeral. Howdy, Ringbone. What you two gents doin' out here in the mountains? Who's the hombre you got there, Funeral?"

"Friend of mine," grunted Funeral O'Neill. "Met with a little accident. You ask us why we're out here. We could ask you the same, Carl Hannegan."

"Heard there was a few of my Circle Z strays over here." Hannegan gigged his horse close and looked sharply at Prof Faulcon. "Who is the ol' coot an' what happened to him?"

Funeral regarded Hannegan bleakly. Hannegan had been in this country for almost two years, homesteading back in rocky Mission canyon, and Funeral had never cottoned to the man. For one thing, Hannegan kept a tough bunch around him—tough hands, gun-hung. He ran a few cattle—not enough to make a living on—but still he always seemed to be well heeled with money.

"You're inquisitive," murmured Funeral.

Hannegan lifted heavy eyes. "Don't take an innercent question wrong, O'Neill. . ." Suddenly Funeral saw those greenish-brown eyes turn to steel. Only then had he really seen beneath the man's easy exterior. Anger flared across those eyes, lived and breathed, then Hannegan controlled it.

"I'll ride with you," he said.

"No need," said Ringbone. "We can handle it alone."

"Headin' that way, though," said Hannegan.

The ride to the Hawkins ranch was made in silence. The log house was dark when they rode into the clearing and Funeral's *hello* brought a kerosene lamp to life. The undertaker carried the pedant inside, laid him on a cot.

Old man Hawkins' eyes widened. "Hades, that's your ol' frien', the professor, ain't it, Funeral?" He didn't wait for a reply. "The Injuns must be on the warpath back there in the mountains. Look at where that rawhide—"

"No Indian did that," grunted Funeral. He took the wide rawhide thongs from his pocket. "Look at those knots, Hawkins."

The oldster moved closer to the lamp, puckered his aged eyes. "No siree, them ain't Injun knots, Funeral. I've seen them fix them rawhide death contraptions. They use a runnin' knot, kinda like, but this is a square knot. Never did see an Injun tie a square knot."

"Neither have I," said Funeral.

Hannegan said, "Who do you suppose did it, O'Neill?"

But Funeral did not answer. Ringbone said, "He's comin' to, Funeral." The prof stirred, wet his thin lips, mumbled.

"Clear out, you two," Funeral told Hawkins and Hannegan. "What the prof's got to say concerns only me an' Ringbone."

OLD MAN Hawkins hobbled to the door. But Hannegan stood there, legs wide, a twist on his lips. "Me, I'd like to hear what he says," he said.

Ringbone gave him a shove. "Get into the next room."

Hannegan hit, his eyes tight. His knuckles knocked Ringbone against the wall. The short veterinary, fists

up, blood trickling from his mouth, moved toward him. But Funeral O'Neill grabbed the thin rancher. Hannegan whirled, swung. Funeral ducked, his left came in.

The blow knocked Hannegan's head back. The rancher grunted, swore, struck again. He hit Funeral on the jaw. Thoroughly angry now, the undertaker swung hard, knocking Hannegan through the door.

Hannegan landed on the floor in the next room. He spat blood, glared at Funeral. But he said nothing. Funeral slammed the door, strode back to Prof Faulcon.

"Dang it," growled Ringbone, "I don't like it for you to horn in on my fights."

"Forget it," snapped the undertaker; "I been wantin' to hit him for a long, long time." His voice lowered. "What you got to say, prof?"

Prof Faulcon's thin lids rose, closed, opened again. Recognition stabbed across the watery eyes. "Funeral. . ." he murmured. "Good to. . see. . ." His eyes closed.

Funeral shook him gently. "What happened?"

"Found. . .Mimbres. . . Cave. . . in canyon. . . They were robbing. . trains. The cave their hideout. . . They found me, tortured me. . . Wanted to lay the blame on Indians . . .I broke loose. . ."

Funeral looked at Ringbone. "Where is the cave?"

"Up. . .the canyon." The man stirred, licked his lips. "I'm goin' rest. . .sleep a long time. . ." Already his chest rose to his measured breathing.

Funeral got a-foot. Mentally he unscrambled the professor's seemingly nonsensical mutterings. For almost two years lawlessness had ridden the Boxelder range. Twice the Great Northern express had been held up at Black Butte and the bandits had escaped with dust and cash. A bank had been knocked over at Havre, another at Black Eagle. And each time the spores of the bandits had disappeared back in the mountains.

Ringbone stared, popped a peppermint into his mouth. "You mean—he's stumbled on whoever has robbed them trains an' banks?"

"Seems that way," murmured Funeral. Suddenly, he cat-footed silently to the door, jerked it suddenly open. The stooped form of Hannegan, bent to the keyhole, almost fell into the room. But the rancher caught himself in time, jerked himself erect. Anger flushed his thin face.

"You seem mighty interested," said Funeral O'Neill, quietly.

"Can't a man reach over to scrape the mud off'n his boots," growled the rancher.

Old man Hawkins, seated on a homemade chair, cackled toothlessly. "He weren't workin' on his Justins, Funeral. That dog had his haid—"

Hannegan snarled, "Shut up, you ol' fogey!" He studied Funeral coldly. "Seems to me I'll have to trim your ears for you, undertaker. Let's hope that time comes danged pronto." He turned, strode into the night. Soon, above the patter of the rain, came the sound of his hoofs retreating.

Funeral smiled bleakly. "Hawkins, get one of your riders outa the bunkhouse, head him into town for doc. Get a coupla more in the room with proof. Have 'em armed with rifles and sixguns."

Hawkins' craggy brows rose. "What—why the guards, Funeral?"

"I got a hunch prof stumbled onto some important findings. Somebody tried to kill him once—they'll try again. Keep him under guard all the time, savvy?"

"I sure will." Hawkins' Adams-apple bobbed. "But what you an' Ringbone goin' do, Funeral?"

"We got a trail to cut," said Funeral, grimly.

DARKNESS had settled; the rain had stopped. Funeral pointed his bronc south, heading toward Mission canyon. Ringbone rode beside him, chewing a fresh peppermint. The undertaker crammed fresh burley into his pipe.

"Oughta be a moon soon," he murmured.

"Was last night," said Ringbone. "Danged bright, too. But maybe the rain will come up—"

"No clouds in the west."

The moon was up by the time they gained the ridge. Yellow light lay like a benediction across the slow-waving green pines, the rain-washed crags. The beauty of the wilderness brought a touch of admiration to Funeral O'Neill. But this was lost in the turmoil surging the gaunt undertaker's mind.

"Crazy," he muttered. "First thing, that pottery—New Mexico pottery in the Montana mountains. Then this cave in Mission canyon— You mind ever hearin' about a cave there, Ringbone?"

"Never have."

Funeral turned in saddle. "Look yonder," he said, coldly. "Is that a rider down there, following our trail?"

Ringbone peered. "Sure is," he agreed. "By hell, that's Carl Hannegan, I guess! He's hid in the brush an' now he's trailin' us."

Funeral O'Neill leaned back in saddle, sucked his cold pipe. "Hannegan's in on this," he said quietly. "Him an' his gang have been performin' these robberies. The professor has stumbled onto their hiding place. They've decided to kill him and make it look like the Indians had killed him. Therefore there'd be no suspicion on Hannegan and his riders."

Ringbone chewed. "An' then?"

"What'd you use for brains?" snapped Funeral O'Neill. "Sourdough?"

"No use of bitin' your pipe stem off," said Ringbone, placidly.

Funeral sucked hard. "But prof's escaped. The rain come, watersoaked the rawhide, saved his life. Hannegan was out huntin' for prof when he ran into us taking prof to Hawkins's."

"But this cave?"

"That," said Funeral, "is what gets me. . . That and this damned pottery." A chuckle broke from his thin lips. "Let's us exchange places with Carl Hannegan and trail him for a while."

Squatting, hidden by buckbrush, they watched Carl Hannegan ride by, a dim shadow under the moonlight. The rock-strewn ridge, rising behind Hannegan, cut him from view. Ten minutes later, they followed his trail.

The dim moonlight made tracking difficult. But the man, they noticed, was hitting back toward Mission canyon. Here, in this wilderness, he had his den. Now, he was coming home. .

They rode through a clump of chokecherry trees and then the voice from the brush said, "That's far enough, you two!" A rifle cocked noisely. "One move toward your guns an' this hammer's fallin'!" The brush crackled, and Carl Hannegan, rifle up, stepped out.

"Outfoxed us, huh?" murmured Funeral O'Neill.

Hannegan's greenish eyes glittered. "You gents know too much," he said sternly. He called, "Mike," and another man came from the brush behind them. Squat, ugly, he packed two .45's, cradled a Winchester. "Get their guns, Mike."

"Get off your horses," growled Mike.

Funeral O'Neill glanced at Ringbone. Jaw working on a peppermint, the horse-medico was coldly studying the situation, his eyes narrow slits. Anger touched the undertaker, but he held it and kept his agile mind clear. He swept lazy eyes over Carl Hannegan. He said, "My embalming needle's waiting for you, Hannegan. . ."

HANNEGAN smiled sourly. "You'll never stick that needle into my carcass, O'Neill," he snapped. "But if'n that single-brained partner of your'n don't watch that gunhand of his'n—"

"Take it easy, Ringbone," advised Funeral.

Ringbone snarled, "Shoot us for a coupla broken down ruptured sagehens! Ridin' right into this dog's trap! We oughta—"

Funeral stepped down. Mike took his guns. When Ringbone had also been disarmed, Hannegan made them mount. "You lead the way, Mike," he said. "I'll ride behind with my rifle out."

Mike asked, "We gotta get out this country, Hannegan. Our string's played out here. . . Once that professor gets so he can tell all he knows an' the law'll be so thick in these mountains that—"

"We'll clear out," snapped Hannegan.

"That danged perfesser," growled Mike, "sure wrecked things. Why in the hell did that danged Shady have to collect that pottery? If'n it hadn't been for him the perfesser would never—"

"Get moving," ordered Hannegan.

With Mike in the lead, they headed back toward the canyon. Funeral glanced over his shoulder, grinned bleakly as he saw Hannegan behind, rifle trained on him. A tiny warm spot grew on his spine and he felt ticklish. Hannegan might let that hammer drop and—

Ringbone asked, quietly, "Where'd you figure they're takin' us, Funeral?'

"T' the cave, I reckon. You see, they gotta get rid of us. Otherwise, they won't have time to—"

"I know that." The veterinary scowled. "We're behin' the eight ball, Funeral?"

But Funeral saw some light in the darkness. "Maybe so," he agreed. "But otherwise we might never have found that cave, Ringbone."

Hannegan ordered sternly, "Close that talk, you two."

TWO HOURS later they skirted the edge of a cliff. A heavy growth of chokecherry trees flanked an outcropping. Mike put his horse into these and Hannegan bade them follow. A voice called from the darkness, "Who's there?"

Mike said, "Me an' Hannegan."

The speaker came forward, breaking the brush. He was a hard-faced, narrow-eyed man, carrying a rifle. He stared at Funeral and Ringbone. "What's these two hellions—?"

"We're pullin' out," snapped Hannegan. "All the outfit in the den?"

"Pullin' out? Why, ain't these good pickin's?"

"Follow us."

The side of the mountain seemed to break apart. They rode into a gigantic cave. Two men were seated around a pine fire playing cards on a saddleblanket. The flickering flames cast shimmering shadows on the rocky walls. Amazement crept through Funeral O'Neill, showed itself in Ringbone's gaping jaw.

"Never knew a cave this size—"

Hannegan cut Funeral short. "Get off'n your broncs, you two. Mike, tie their hands. Use wet rawhide. Later, before we leave, we'll put one of them rawhide collars on them. Put 'em in that side cave."

Mike worked swiftly, competently. Funeral grunted as the rawhide cut into his wrists. Despair tugged at the undertaker; he put it aside. While Mike tied him, his eyes ran around the interior. Yonder, against the rocky wall, was a manger and, tied to it, were the outlaws' horses, munching wild grass. Saddles hung from the wall on wooden stakes driven into cracks.

"Get movin'," grunted Mike.

The longrider herded them through a passageway. Here was a smaller cave. He made them sit down, and he tied their legs with rawhide. Then he went back to the main cave, his bootheels pounding against the rock floor.

Funeral studied the cave and murmured, "By hades, Ringbone, these men have made a great discovery. A great cave, here in the Little Rockies. . . Wait until the people in Boxelder hear—"

"They won't hear about it from us," said Ringbone dourly. "Prof Faulcon might tell them but we won't. Hannegan ain't forgettin' the beatin' you gave him down at Hawkins' ranch."

Funeral's long face clouded. "We'll get out," he encouraged.

"And how will we?" Cynically.

"Prof got away."

Ringbone scowled. "By heaven, he did!" He smiled grimly. "Well, anyway, we know where that pottery come from. One of these gents kinda collects it, huh?" The vet's smile broke into a chuckle. "Don't that beat it all—a danged longrider collectin' pottery— Say, you mean this gang makes raids as far south as New Mexico?"

"Looks like it."

Hannegan was talking in loud tones. "The jig's over with, boys. Load the haul into saddlebags an'

we'll take two pack horses. We gotta drift, an' drift pronto."

"How about O'Neill an' Smith?"

A short silence. Then Hannegan said, "We'll get Shady to put some of those rawhide collars on 'em. By the time the law does find this place they'll be dead. Danged hellions, they've bucked me too long."

Boots ground against rock. A bronc grunted as a saddle slapped home. Funeral rolled over, backed up to Ringbone. "For God's sake, Ringbone," he grunted, "start chewing!"

Ringbone stared. "Start *what?*"

"The rawhide," growled Funeral. "My wrists."

Ringbone said, "I can crack a black walnut with my teeth." He twisted around; Funeral felt his teeth bite into the rawhide. He lay there, sweat on his forehead, and listened to the men in the other cave. This was a race against time. Time that ticked on, and on. . .

"GOT THAT dust loaded, Jake?" asked Hannegan.

"A mite more."

Mike growled, "I got my job loaded okay. Dang, hope that rain comes up again, an' washes out our tracks."

"Shady," said Hannegan. "Better get some rawhide an' make them neckties." His chuckle rang in Funeral's ears. "That danged scarecrow undertaker has stuck his needle into his last man."

"Okay, Hannegan."

Justins ground toward them. Three strands bound Funeral's wrist; Ringbone had chewed two apart. Now, jaws working madly, he chewed, the approaching boots pounding in his ears. Suddenly he grunted, exhaled. And Funeral, working swiftly, had freed wrists of the entangling rawhide.

But, already, Shady was on them. Square shoulders limned above the undertaker. Heart pounding, Funeral lay there, hands still behind him. To Shady, it looked as though he were still tied.

"Sit up, O'Neill," he grunted.

Funeral looked at the thick wet rawhide in the outlaw's grimy hands. Anger beat like a muffled drum in him. This was not a man's way to fight and kill—this was the method of the savage, the aborigine.

"I can't sit up—my hands—"

Shady made his mistake then. He grabbed Funeral by the shoulder, went to jerk him upright. And the undertaker's long right arm, snaking out in a circle, clamped around the longrider's neck, dragging him down. Shady grunted, went to holler, but Funeral's grip cut off his windpipe. Funeral's left hand came in.

He hit Shady on the forehead. A glancing blow, with little result. And then they were rolling on the stone floor. With sinking heart, Funeral fought. He twisted the man around, then Ringbone's boots came in. The Justins smashed against Shady's head, crumpled the man into a limp ball.

FUNERAL panted, "*Gracias*, amigo. You reckon they heard—" Already he had one of Shady's .45's. He placed the barrel against the rawhide knot between his ankles, let the hammer fall.

Roar cascaded through the cave. The bullet tore through the knot, whammed onto the rock, lifted across space in evil song. And hard above its ringing echoes came the cry of men, the excited stomp of frightened broncs.

"Shady," hollered Hannegan. "What happened?"

Quickly Funeral O'Neill ripped the rawhide from his ankles. He whirled, legs weak, stepped toward the recumbent Ringbone, .45 in hand.

"You ain't shootin' the rawhide off'n my wrists," said Ringbone steadily. "I ain't gonna get no bullet in my gizzard—"

Funeral allowed a grim smile. "Maybe Shady's got a knife—" But Shady didn't.

"We're comin' in," roared Hannegan.

"Come in," invited Funeral O'Neill. "An' step into our lead, hombres. Shady's out of the picture—I got his gun. And my needle's waitin' for you, Hannegan!"

"You'll never stick that needle into me," snapped Hannegan. "Scatter out, men. Mike, settle behind the

mangers. Jake, take this side. We got them trapped in that cave. There's only one way out an' that's into this section—"

"But we gotta get outa here, Hannegan!"

"We'll get out. . .with plenty of time. But before we go I aim to salt down O'Neill an' Smith. Somethin' I've craved to do for a long time."

SILENCE settled, broken only by the occasional snort of a horse. Funeral untied Ringbone, shoved one of Shady's cutters into the vet's hand. Then settled back against the wall, brows knitted, and watched the entrance.

"There's a way. . ." he murmured.

"Yeah," snorted Ringbone. "We could walk out there an' walk into lead. We could— We got guns, but they still hold the upper hand."

Shady muttered, sat up, eyes wild. Gradually the fundamentals of the situation crept into his brain. "Out tricked me, huh," he muttered. He lifted his voice. "Hey, Hannegan—"

"Yeah."

"They jumped me—got my guns—"

"I know that. Sit tight, an' we'll smoke 'em out."

Shady moaned, held his head. "What'd you hit me with?" he wanted to know. "The hull ha'f of the mountain?"

Funeral looked at Ringbone's enormous boots. "Just about," he murmured. Plans were gathering in his brain; he sorted through them, found nothing logical. They could walk through that archway, guns roaring in a surprise attack. They'd get some of Hannegan's gang—maybe Hannegan—but guns would get them too.

"We got you in a spot, Hannegan," hollered the undertaker. "We can stay in here for a danged long time. But you gents can't stay much longer. Already Prof Faulcon has probably told his story to Sheriff Dunlap. An' maybeso right now Dunlap an' his deputies are headin' this way—"

Silence. Then Hannegan said, "He's right."

"Let's just pull out," said Mike.

Shady roared, "an' leave me behind for the law to hang!" His voice held a hysterical note. "You can't do that, not to me. . . ."

Funeral studied the man. He was a jittery, gun-hung killer—his nerves were shot, his mind broken. And then, Funeral saw their way out.

"They don't give a dang about you, Shady."

Shady growled, "They better not try anythin' like that or I'll—Lord, I wish I had a gun, O'Neill."

"We're leavin'," came back Hannegan's voice. "Okay, boys, swing up. Get that packhorse's lead-rope."

FUNERAL O'NEILL'S lips showed a strange smile. He knew that Hannegan would never leave—not when Hannegan had him and Ringbone ready for the meat-axe. Hannegan would make out like he was leaving and then hide in the brush for an ambush. . . . But Shady didn't reason it that way.

"Gimme a gun, O'Neill. I'm goin' out there."

"They'll kill you—"

"Might just as well die under lead as dangling from a hangnoose. You gents once get me behind bars an' they look up my record—Gimme a gun!"

"You'll turn it on me!"

"I'll bargain with you." The owl-hooter's voice was horse. "Gimme a gun an' I'll walk out there. An' if I come through alive I'll only ask an hour start of you. One hour before the law hits my trail—That a deal, undertaker?"

"Here's the gun."

Shady fondled the .45 lovingly. His gray eyes flared. He whirled the cylinder, then said, "I'm comin' out—with a gun!" Now he walked forward. And Funeral O'Neill, grabbing Ringbone's gun, moved forward too. About five feet behind the crazed outlaw. Now Shady walked through the archway.

Gun-roar lifted in shattering cacophony. A bullet smashed into the longrider, sent him staggering forward. His gun stabbing flame, the longrider steadied himself, stood with

spread legs. Mike's scream cut through the stabbing roar.

"He got me—Hannegan—"

"You—doublecross me—" Shady was grinning. Grinning, and dying on his feet. And now, the gun of Funeral O'Neill came into play. The gaunt undertaker, hunkered low by the archway, let his hammer fall.

Already Shady's lead had killed Mike, sent another down. Two remained, and Funeral O'Neill sent one falling, a well-placed bullet in the man's chest. Shady's gun had ceased speaking now, and the man's knees were caving. Funeral lifted his smoking gun on Hannegan.

Hannegan squatted behind a dead horse, .45 talking. A bullet chipped rock above Funeral. The undertaker felt pain stab his chest. From the corner of his eye, he saw Ringbone Smith plunge in, grab the fallen Shady's gun. And as the vet rolled over, he shot once. Then his gun clicked on an empty cartridge.

But one shot was enough. His lead hit Hannegan in the forehead. Funeral got to his feet, smiling wryly.

"Damn, Ringbone, I wanted Hannegan—"

"T'ain't what you want," advised Ringbone gruffly; "it's what you get. You—got a bullet in your chest?"

"Splinter of rock." Funeral knelt beside Shady, shook the man gently. The eyes opened, bloody lips smiled.

"Funny thing," the outlaw murmured. "Me, fightin' for the law—I'll bet my ol' pals down south—"

Funeral got to his feet. "Dead," he said quietly. "Went out the way he wanted, his guns talking. . . . Maybe if he had had the right start when he was a kid he'd have been a good—"

"An' maybe not," growled the realistic Ringbone. "Well, we better get this mess into town. Shove 'em into coffins, hol' an inquest, an'—What you grinnin' about, you lanky buzzard?"

"Hannegan."

"What'd you mean?"

"He said I'd never stick my needle into him. But I'll use that new one—that one I just got—"

Ringbone shuddered. "You ol' buzzard." Then he smiled widely. "But it'll be a hollow victory, Funeral, 'cause he'll never feel it!"

(THE END)

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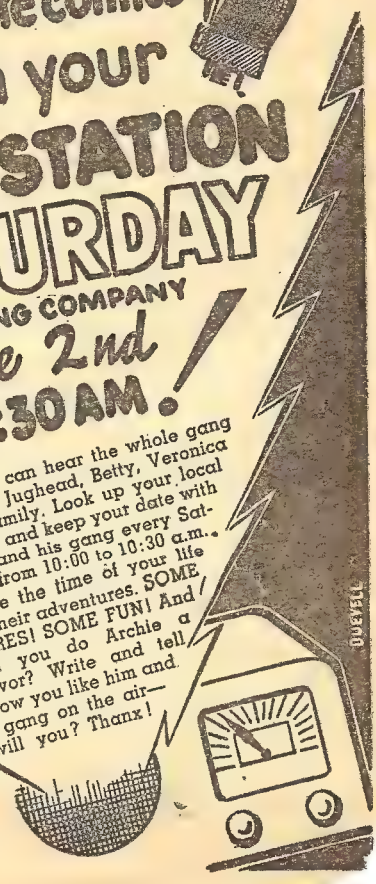

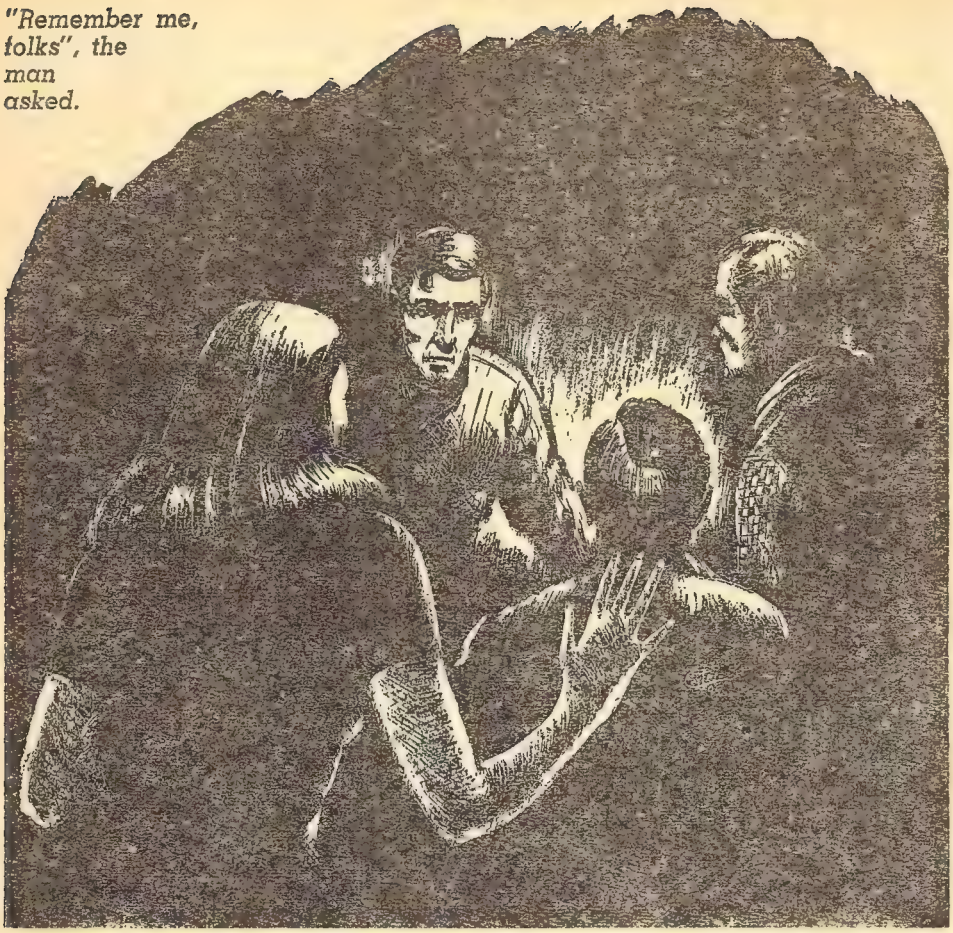

"Remember me, folks", the man asked.

OUTLAW'S COURT

By T. W. Ford

(Author of "Get Off The Owlhoot", "The Kid Goes Killer", etc.)

***One** of you three sold me out to the law the night they got me. Tonight I'm going to find out which one it was!*

THREE persons sat eating the greasy dinner at the oilcloth table in the Cantina de Cassidy at the Brush Forks crossroads. Before the railroad spur was built down the Tonapee Valley to Tonapee Center some twenty odd miles to the east, the crossroads had been a busy place. The freighters bringing cargo down from the former end of the rail line passed through there; also three stage lines. But with the extension of the railroad, it all petered out. Now one coach made a trip up from Faro once a week to meet the line that ran westward every other day to Elk Branch. That was all.

The store and the handful of cabins at the intersection was abandoned caving-in derelicts. They stood like

blind sentinels at the crossing beside Gunfire Creek's sluggish, yellow waters. There was only the cantina left, and the two men and one woman eating there now had agreed when they first sat down that the place was a fester sore on the tail-end of creation.

The cantina had been built by one Miguel Cassidy, a shy-smiling little Mex who'd been dubbed "Cassidy" by a father in honor of a very brave gringo who'd saved his life once below the line. But when the crossroads business began to die, Miguel Cassidy had sold out to a one-eyed breed and gone back to the home of his fathers in Mananaland.

"That's the way the story goes, anyways," said Garland, a flat-bodied man with abnormally high cheek bones. Above them, his eyes looked like elongated chips of glass. He was plainly garbed, with one tied-down holster on his left thigh. But he ate right-handed. He poised a chunk of beef before his slice of mouth. "Miguel was a nice gent—they say."

The woman, Sally Murdee, with glowing dark red hair, looked across the table. "You've lived up this way?" she asked.

Nothing happened to Jo-Jo Garland's face actually. It just went dead, and a light like a cold flame behind his eyes said, "Be careful." He shrugged. "Been through here before, few times. Reckon it was over Selby way I heard the yarn." Selby was the range town down the line to the southwest. "You come from these parts, ma'm?" That was only a half lie.

Sally Murdee smiled prettily out of her dark eyes. She shook her head as she smoothed her dress down over her high-bosomed figure. She wore too much rouge and had too bold a stare for a lady. "Oh, no. I—I have relatives in this part of the country. But I've never been here before." That was a whole lie.

"Me, neither," put in Edward Burson, a little, birdfaced man in a sombre black suit of broadcloth. He was a banker. He shook his head of thinning light yellow hair to accent the statement. And that was a lie, too.

THE waiter came in, a big slouching man in a dirty apron, with a pan of fresh biscuits. Something like a six-gun butt jutted beneath the apron. They didn't notice it though—nor the fact that the one-eyed breed proprietor had not yet put in an appearance. Jo-Jo Garland slid the coffee pot at the waiter.

"Suppose, gopher, you take this gully wash back and bring us some hot java. And—hot!" he ordered.

The slouching man rolled an eye uglily down at him. It wasn't the look of a servant in a mangy little cantina. "Yeah? Sorta persnicketty, ain't you, pard?" Then he turned and shuffled out to the kitchen with Garland scowling in puzzlement after him.

Sally Murdee wiped her mouth with an exaggeratedly dainty gesture. She flashed a longing look at the shot glass of whisky beside Garland's plate. "There's something—something strange about this place. It—it's real spooky-like." She looked around at the yellowed seamed walls of the little dining room and through the open side door into the adjoining barroom. That was empty. "I—" She dropped a hand to her pocketbook on the chair beside her. There was a nice little double-barrelled derringer in it.

Garland glanced around. "Nothing to fear here. Why—" He paused as he saw the bartender lounging in the connecting doorway. He sucked on a cigaret and regarded them with cold insolence a full moment before he turned away. "Nothing. Less'n it's that one over there." Letting his gaze take in the voluptuous figure of the woman, he speared a knife at the man diagonally across at a corner table in the front.

The gent sat half couched in a chair, head on his chest. Even as they glanced over, he snored softly, apparently sleeping off a skinful of red-eye. He was medium-sized with bat-winged chapped legs sprawled out before him. A large-brimmed sombrero, sloped forward on his eyebrows, hid his face. Water from a leak in a corner of the room had splotched a dark uneven pattern on one corner of his hickory shirt; he seemed oblivious to it.

Burson never knew what made the thing pop into his mind, or what made him voice the thought, either. Perhaps it was that double slug of rye whisky he'd had when he came in wet from the trail an hour before. "Used to know a ranny down this way. Fella by the name of Killi—" His eyes hooded warily. "Killi-cut—or was it just plain 'Killy'," he added, changing what he had been going to say.

Garland became busily engaged in mashing a biscuit into the gravy on his plate. "Never heard of no jasper by that name."

The woman only looked blank as she drew out a small hand mirror and primped at her hair, but her silence was as much of a lie as Jo-Jo Garland's denial. The name the banker had been about to say was "Killigan." Bigger Killigan had been the man.

"And a wire-tough bitter-ender of a piece of man, too," Garland was adding to himself. He had known him real well.

WALLACE KILLIGAN had been his name by baptism, but down through that chunk of the Southwest he had been known as "Big" Killigan. Not because he was large in hulk; he wasn't. But there had been something big and indomitable about the man, something behind the half-humorous face with sad, strikingly black eyes. Those eyes could flame with bitter savage fury too. And when they did, a forerunner to violent action, hombres facing him felt suddenly puny and insignificant.

Big Killigan had been declared an outlaw, and he didn't make his living by any business inside the bounds of the Law. But back then, two county sheriffs had admitted they would never arrest him, much less attempt to bring him in. They savvied what had sent Killigan back into the broken hills country to live like a wild thing despising human critters. It had happened when he was just a beardless button in his teens. The big Bearpaw Cattle Pool had moved onto the Upper Selby range, buying out the old Box-T, and then acquiring some of the smaller spread. But Big Killigan's father had refused to sell out at their price.

Owslow, boss of the Bearpaw, was a range pirate. What he couldn't get one way he acquired another. Old, blunt, simple Mike Killigan had found himself in court fighting a charge that his title of ownership was spurious. Old Mike couldn't help it if the original owner hadn't filed properly. All he knew was that he had paid for it and worked it. The boy, Big, thought the same way. That was why he put a slug through the chest of the deputy who shot his dad the day the posse came to evict them from the land. That had made him an outlawed.

In his bitterness, he had accepted the role gladly; incessantly, for three-four years, he had warred on the Bearpaw that had bought his father's place at auction. Then, one night in Selby, they'd captured him and sent him up to the Big House on the killing charge.

Jo-Jo Garland knew every detail of the story because once he had ridden Big Killigan's bunch. At the thought, his face got a haunted look.

Sally Murdee had known Big Killigan too. Once she had worked in Selby as a singer at a honky tonk. And the night they had cornered him, when he had come running to her cabin to hide as the badge-packers closed in, she had slammed the door in his face. It was something she'd like to forget, too.

As he fired up a stogie, Banker Edward Burson's eyes were still hooded. Nobody now would ever guess he was the same Wild Ed Burson, hard-drinking card sharp of Selby almost eight years ago. He recalled Killigan too. He had owed Killigan some dinero when they captured him. But, shucks, what would a gent in the Big House for life do with money, anyway? His head jerked nervously doorward as he thought he heard somebody outside in the thin hissing rain.

THE waiter brought back the fresh pot of steaming java, slapping it down on the table so some of it sloshed out the spout. Only it wasn't the same waiter. This was a

little man with a bar of black mustache that hid most of a scrawl of scar on his upper lip. Garland saw that he was another man as the latter turned away, saw too the shoulder rig as his coat flapped wide a moment. The slices of glassy eyes narrowed and he eased a hand down toward his own holster. He wished to blazes old Spike Hontell would get here. When he had ridden in day before yesterday it seemed Spike had left a message for him saying he would be back shortly.

Sally Murdee put down her emptied coffee cup and shivered slightly. "That westbound stage just has to come along soon. I never could spend the night here." She had arrived that midday on the coach from the north that made connections with the line that ran into Selby. "I never could spend the night here at all."

"Looks like you're a-going to, ma'm. The Selby stage won't be through here today—or tonight." It was the man in the corner who had apparently been slumbering. He was standing now, absolutely s t e a d y, small but perfectly round eyes drilling into them across the room. "There was an attempt made to hold it up—and it turned back to Tonapee . . .My boys made the attempt."

Burson came out of his chair, one white-knuckled h a n d around the heavy gold watch-chain bridging his vest. "Say, who are you—"

Moving from behind the corner table, with that curiously relaxed motion of his body, the medium-sized gent whipped off his sombrero. "Big Killigan! Don't you remember me, folks?"

GARLAND was the only one who had not moved. He peered with eyes twisted from beneath the lock of sandy hair hanging over his forehead. Then he dropped the match with which he had been about to light his tube of Durham. He started to bend to recover it from the floor.

"Don't!" Big Killigan's easy voice had become as sharp as a gunshot. "Don't—Jo-Jo! I always was a split second faster 'n you on the draw. Remember? Besides, Jo-Jo, you're covered—well covered." He gestured around.

In the doorway to the barroom stood the lank bartender, a gun already sweeping the room. Back by the entrance to the kitchen was the big slouching man who had served them, already whipping a couple of hoglegs from beneath his greasy apron. And in the rear corner stood the little man with the scar-hiding mustache, faced pinched up as he waited with thumbs hooked over cocked hammers.

"My boys," Big Killigan explained. "The breed owner took a little vacation for a few days. . .My new bunch."

Garland summoned a grin as he pulled his hand away from the gun scabbard as if it had turned white-hot. "Shucks, Big! I figgered you might uh been sore 'cause I got orey-eyed and wasn't no help the night the John Laws grabbed you. Shucks, Big. You know—"

Killigan scratched a match on a thumbnail and put it to the quirly spiking from good-natured generous-curved mouth. "Hell, Jo-Jo. A gent's got to irrigate his tonsils once in a while—and Fate ain't in the habit of telling him what's coming up next in the deal. Hell—"

Banker Burson was erect and kicking back his chair. "See here, Mr. Killigan. There happenes to be a lady present and—"

Killigan cocked an eye at him as he came closer. He'd always had a knack of seeming to move without effort. And very silently. "The same old hoorawing tinhorn, eh? Old Wild Ed! And as far as a lady, well who said she was—"

"'Wild Ed'?" repeated Burson pompously. "I don't know who you're talking about. And I don't know you either, for that matter. I—"

"Changed your handle to 'L' Burson now, eh, Ed?" Without seeming to move, Killigan sent the hot match flipping from his fingers. It arrowed right at the undersized ex-gambler banker, stinging his cheek with its hot tip.

Burson squealed as he ducked too late and pawed at his whitish skin. "Damn you, Big! Damn you," his

transparent feeble bluff collapsed. "Say, you should be in prison. You must be a fugitive and—"

The scrape of the extra chair Big Killigan pivoted out from the table broke off Burson's word as he cowered. The outlaw bestrode it, folding his arms across the back. "Don't git hopeful idees, Ed. In view of the circumstances of the killing, the governor pardoned me 'bout seven months back. I ain't no fugitive—yet. After this night's done though. . ." He let it hang there.,

SALLY MURDEE was perfectly cool. She reached across and took Garland's shot of redeye and put it down her throat with an experienced flip. "Of course I remember you, Big. Even with that premature gray at your temples. You are always four square in my book—and never small potatoes. But I don't understand this?"

"No-o?" said Killigan softly as he let his black holes of eyes take in every detail of her pretty face. The eyes grew sadder a moment. Then he gestured to his men. "Clean the hardware off 'em, boys!"

They got Garland's hip gun; it was all he had. And the derringer from Sally Murdee's bag. On the banker, they found a short-barrelled .32 hidden in a rig beneath a shoulder, another in his waistband beneath his austere white shirt, and a third, a derringer, down one of his boots. Killigan laughed at him silently, his mouth twisting cruelly.

"Well, you always did like to have an ace or so up your sleeve, Ed. . . All right. Listen close—and you'll understand things." He pointed at Sally with his smoking quirly. "I told you the stage to Selby you're waiting for won't be along. My boys made it turn back. You don't want to go to Selby anyway, Sally."

She lifted her nose scornfully. "Mosby Purcell is—"

"It was me wrote you that letter signed 'Mosby Purcell,' Sally. He ain't waiting for you; he ain't got a big outfit with a dobie hacienda or nothing, and he ain't still in love with you and craving to marry you—because he died about four years back when he got orey-eyed and fell off the creek bridge and drowned. Me, I sent you the money to make the trip down this way too."

The woman sat with her jaw unhinged stupidly. For a moment, it looked as if she would cry. Then her nostrils pinched in and the hard lines, bred by her rough life, gullied her face. And suddenly the men in the room realized her red hair was dyed now. "Then—then, why did you—"

Killigan was already turned to Jo-Jo Garland. For a moment, the outlaw's eyes crinkled around the corners as if thinking of old times. "Jo-Jo, I brought you down here too. A rider looked you up with a message from your old pard, Spike Hontell. The rider told that Spike said he was sick in bed, living his last days, and how he'd like to see you. . .Jo-Jo, knowing you and how you liked the skirts, I knew that would bring you along. Old Spike did have a mighty fancy-looking daughter, didn't he? Well, she up and married a beef buyer and went to K. C. to live some time back. Where Spike is, I don't have no idea. But he ain't in Selby. So they's no sense in going there, is there?"

JO-JO'S hand was very steady as he plucked the quirly stub from his lips. " 'Bout as much as spitten in the crick to start a flood, Big. . . Something's eating on you plumb bad, boss."

"Uh-huh. . .Mebbeso tonight I'll sure it afore we leave here—them what does leave." He turned to Burson who sat perched on the edge of his chair and sized him up with a sneer. "Aw, stop whining, Ed. You always was a two-spot."

"I ain't saying nothing." Burson managed to make it sullen.

"You're still whining, somehow. . Well, Ed, you got a letter too. A nice lawyer's letter down to your bank. Said as how one Texas Kelso had left a chunk of dinero for you with this lawyer before Texas died. And seeing as how Texas didn't make his money exactly legal, the lawyer fella thought it better to meet you out here on the quiet. Reckon you

know that lawyer was me, now, Ed. But I knew it'd bring you, Ed. You'd row yourself up Mud Creek with your nose for a paddle to git your dewclaws on a few dollars, by grab!"

Burson plucked at the watch-chain. "If it's money you—"

"I'm collecting my payoff—but it won't be in money tonight, Ed! Not by a danged sight!" He drummed thoughtfully on the table.

Jo-Jo turned and signed to the man in the barroom doorway. "Bring us in a bottle of redeye. I'll pay for it. Big, I reckon I ain't forgot how your old bullet wounds itch ya on a wet night. Few shots always used to make 'em let up a mite."

Big Killigan cut his eyes over to his one-time gunman, then pulled away as if he feared he might soften. The bottle came and the three men had a drink, Burson sloshing his down his shirt front.

"Yep, folks, I'm outa prison. I've been spending a heap of time tracking you three down. . .And it weren't because uh the love overflowing my heart. Naw. . .You see, the night they grabbed me in Selby, somebody sold me out to them badge-packers. . .It was—one of you three. . ."

THE room was abruptly hot and close-cramped as if somehow the walls were pushing in on them. Jo-Jo Garland nodded, watching his former boss. Killigan made a little groove in the oilcloth with his thumbnail.

"I know that. . .Word got to me in the Big House about it. Don't argufy!" He flipped up a hand as Burson opened his jaw. "I know! And they were only three who could have cold me out—you three."

He stood up slowly and those at the table got that little insignificant feeling as his eyes raked them. "You, Jo-Jo, you was camped with me up on Crow Peak. You knew I was going into Selby that night."

Jo-Jo nodded. "Yeah, I knew, Big."

Killigan indicated the woman with his head. "Sally, back in them days, I reckon I was in love with you. You seemed prettier than a spotted pony. I had an engagement to meet you that night. So *you* knew I was coming in, too."

The woman's mouth twisted but she said nothing.

"Ed, you owed me some dinero. I lent it to you the Hasling boys gave you twenty-four hours to pay up or hit the trail. You was ready to pay me, and I'd sent you word through your brother that I'd be in that night. So—"

"By grab, Big, I'll pay you now—with interest. I—I'll pay you d-double."

"This is going to be paid in blood, Ed Burson. You knew I was coming in, so you could have tipped off the John Laws too. . .Anyways, it was one of you three. *One—of—you*!"

"What're you going to do, Big?" Jo-Jo asked calmly.

Big Killigan didn't answer. Slapping on his sombrero, he walked over to the stairs that led to the bedroom up above. Climbed them. Out of sight at the top, his voice came back.

"Bring Garland up first, boys."

Jo-Jo rose before two of them closed in on them. He poured himself a fresh drink, smiled around, then dumped it off. And he walked across the room and up the stairs with a fixed smile. The man with the black mustache came back to stand guard with the lank one who'd acted as bartender.

IT WAS some twenty minutes later when Jo-Jo Garland came down those stairs. He half stumbled down, one hand taloned to the railing, head wobbling sleepily. His face was bruised and swollen with blood running from a fist-gashed lip and his nose as well. The mustached one walked over and gave him the bottle to swig from. When Jo-Jo lowered it, he managed a lopsided grimace meant for a grin.

"Prison didn't soften him up none at all." Then the other two knew for certain that Garland hadn't admitted to playing traitor to Killigan.

"You—B u r s o n," said the big slouching man. And he gave the timid ex-gambler a shove as the latter inched away from the table.

The rain had ceased to spit against the dobie building when Ed Burson

fumbled his way down the stairs. He bore no marks. But his face was like dust-colored parchment with his teeth outlined through the thin lips ripped back tightly. "He—he can't do that," he quavered. "He can't."

What he meant was that Big Killigan had informed him he knew where he lived and worked now, knew he had married the daughter of the retired president of that bank. And Big had threatened to send word to the president about how Burson had been a one-time card sharp, a drunkard, and crooked in the bargain.

Lips parted, the woman waited. Chuck, the slouching one behind Burson on the stairs, looked back for his orders. Then he turned to the woman and signalled her to come. Rising, she swayed a moment. Jo-Jo saw her small white teeth gouge into her lower lip. She half pirouetted to flounce out her skirt, then moved up the stairs with red head high.

SALLY MURDEE wasn't long in returning. She held a wisp of handkerchief to her red-eyed face as she came back down. But when she got behind the table once again, she broke. With a dry sob, she signalled to the bottle, swallowing the drink in one gulp when Jo-Jo Garland poured it. Every last day of her age marked her face.

"How—how did he know I have a young daughter and wh-where she—" She broke off, burying her head in her arms. Big Killigan had used the daughter as a club over her, threatening to send the child the truth about her mother. "That man—he—h-he hasn't a heart any more. He—"

It was the boots of Big Killigan on the stairs that silenced her. He had been under strain too. The little gullies furrowed in his face from his freckled short nose down to the corners of his mouth told that. Heeling out his quirly on the floor, he hiked at his gunbelt.

"All right. None of you confessed—as I expected. Never counted on that at all. . .But one of you made a slip, a bad one. You—"

"It was him—him!" screeched Burson frenziedly, jumping up as he levelled a shaky finger at Jo-Jo Garland. "I could see it on his face all the time—that dirty guilty look. He—"

"Stop blatting, Ed!. . .One of you made a slip. . .It told me who did it—who sold me out to the badge-packers." He turned to Chuck and told him to bring the ponies out of the shed. "We'll be leaving—all but one of us. . ."

CHUCK went out through the kitchen and they heard the rear door slam. It was very still in the front room of the cantina, Big Killigan studying the tip of his quirly with an unreadable face. Burson's jaw worked a couple of times as he mopped his face with a big bandana, but he said nothing.

Outside, a gun crackled twice. There was a yell of surprise, a chopped off oath—Then they heard the sudden drum of hoofs splashing through puddles. A horse whinnied. Killigan and his men had galvanized, their weapons leaping into their hands. "What the—"

The back door slammed and the bar was plunked across on the inside. And Chuck, wild-eyed, rushed into the front of the place, holding a smoking gun. "Cripes, Big! Half the pants-wearing citizens of Selby County is outside! It's Spur Owslow of the Bearpaw heading 'em and—"

A hail of lead spattered against the outside walls of the place. Splinters jumped from the shutters of one of the windows. Then a harsh authoritative voice rose above the turmoil.

"Come out and give yourself up, Killigan, ya danged coyote!" somebody outside ordered fiercely. "Come out or we'll blast the damn place down!"

Without moving, Killigan seemed to take on inches in statue. He said, finally, "How in tarnation did them pack rats know I was down this way?" Then he moved toward one of the shuttered windows to yell back an answer to them.

Jo-Jo leaped in his path. "Easy, boss! Even if they been tipped off, they can't be absolutely sure you're here now! Don't answer!"

There was a little flicker, of hu-

mor perhaps, in Big Killigan's eyes when he cut them at Jo-Jo. Then the outlaw boss was cooly taking command as fresh lead whacked into the sides of the building. "Git that lamp on the table over behind the counter. . .Douse the ceilin' lamp, Chuck!. . .Hell, this place has so danged many doorways to cover—" At a sound out in front, he leaped to the front door, yanked it open, and triggered twice. There was a bellow of pain out there before he slammed it closed and dropped the bar across on the inside. "And so many windas, too!"

"Chuck, you take the winda on this side!" He thumbed at the lank one who'd posed as the drink wrangler to get into the barroom and take the windows there. The man with the black bar of mustache he put at the rear door to the kitchen. "Jo-Jo—" He hesitated, then went on. "Git upstairs! The stand of cottonwoods comes right down smack 'gainst the left side of this place. They might try to git from one of them in a second-floor window or onto the roof. They's a trap door in the roof. A man could git in or—" He didn't finish it as he and his one-time pard locked eyes a moment.

"NOBODY'LL git in that trap door—alive, boss." And Jo-Jo Garland hit the stairs two at a time after grabbing his hoglegs from a side table where they'd been laid. "This is like old times, Big!"

"You!" Killigan jabbed a finger at the openly quaking banker, Burson. "There's a dirt cellar under this place with an outside entrance. Git down there an—" When Burson shook his head and whined incoherent words, the outlaw picked up one of the guns stripped from Burson and shoved it at him. "Git down there! Chuck, throw him down!"

Chuck grabbed the ex-gambler banker by a shoulder, hustled him over to a door beneath the staircase, and thrust him down the stairs to the dirt cellar. Killigan and the red-headed woman measured stares.

"There's an outside stairs running up the back of this place, Sally," he said.

"Big, you haven't got any right to make innocent folks risk their lives 'cause you're in a trap! No right! I've always been your friend, Big. I thought a heap of you. I'd never have betrayed you and—"

"If you think so much of me, then you'll stand by me now, woman!" He picked up her derringer and walked over to her with it. "That door onto the outside staircase is in the back room upstairs. . .Right next to the door is a little winda—so you can see anybody coming up it. Now—"

"With this pea-shooter, I'm supposed to hold off—"

"You can plug a man through the window pane at close range, Sally. . Then come to the head of the stairs here and yell for me. Git going!" The report of Chuck's gun punctuated the remark.

He and Chuck were left alone in the dining room of the cantina. The gunman had opened a shutter at each window a few inches so he could fire through. But after the woman had disappeared upstairs, Chuck walked unconcernedly away from the window with a grin.

"It sure is a slick trick, boss. The one what tries to sell you out this time and go over to the enemy will be the one who double-crossed you before and—Hey, them jaspers outside is sure careless with their lead!" he added. A slug had zipped through the aperture of one set of shutters to plunk into the opposite wall.

Burson's bleating came through the open doorway to the cellar. "Big! Don't make me stay down here a-alone! I *always* was for you! I wouldn't double cross you to save my own hide, I swear!"

KILLIGAN bawled at him to stay down there or get his head punched off his shoulders if he came up. There was the chop-chop of Jo-Jo's weapon from the front of the second floor. Immediately on top of it came the almost human cry of a hit horse outside.

Chuck ran to one of the front shutters. "Shucks, Big, you told them lunkheads to stay back under cover so they wouldn't git hurt," he cried

as he saw a wounded animal rolling in the moonlight out there. The gusty wind was dissipating the storm clouds rapidly and a crescent of lemon-hued moon had fingered through the overcast.

From the barroom, Tombstone Tom, the lank one, cut loose with an outburst of fierce fast triggering. Something about his shooting sounded as if it were in dead earnest. "Big! Big!" he hollered through the doorway. Then he stuck his head through to go on, hoarsely, "Big, they ain't the rest of our bunch out there! It's a real posse, I reckon! Owslow is *really* out there—I spotted him by his bald head, boss!"

Big's jaw dropped. Then he whirled and went to a window, dropping to his knees as he worked a shutter wider. After a few moments, he jerked it back and turned into the room, nostrils working.

"Something's gone wrong, Chuck. . I just glimpsed Owslow myself. This ruckus is on the level—after all! It's our skins or—"

BIG KILLIGAN hadn't warred with Owslow's Bearpaw and escaped capture as long as he had because he lost his head easily. He stood a moment with eyes slitted. But at the same time he was checking the cartridge chambers of his hoglegs. "Tell Elmon in the back, Chuck!" Then the boss was at one of the side windows, drilling away at the shadowy figures outside. But after a moment, his firing fell off; he shifted back as a couple of well-aimed slugs sliced wood from the shutter beside his face.

"Git set! I figure they're going to rush us!" he bellowed through the place. They were dismounted and drawn back into the cover of the brush around the place. He eyed the walls of the interior with a lopsided grin. "Never figured I'd cash my chips in some mangy hole like this," he muttered to them.

The scheme had gone amiss somehow. The way it was to have been, when Chuck had gone out back and signaled with a lantern, the rest of the outfit should have come busting in and faked an attack. He was to have placed the three suspected of having double-crossed him before at three crucial spots, as he had done—spots from which they could slip out and join the attackers if they wished. And the one who had, he'd figured in advance, would be the guilty one, the one who had sold him out some years ago.

But now it was a genuine attack with Owslow himself out there. The payoff had come. He wondered at the unshattered stillness, why they were delaying in moving in and smoking him out. "They'll never take me, alive! Ain't no charge against me now. But Owslow'd have my neck in a rope and dancing on air so danged fast that—" Then his head dropped.

He was thinking of the three captives. Two of them were innocent. He had no right to risk their hides. . . His gun muzzles lowered slowly. To be fair to the innocent, maybe he'd better surrender. . .

In the unnatural quiet, Chuck's boots sounded hollowly as he returned from the rear. The gunman's face was grimly set as he paused at the door to the cellar. "Keep your peepers peeled down there, banker man! We can keep fifty men outa this place! One rush and they'll have a bellyful. . .You hear me, huh?" he called down. There was no reply. "Hey, Burson?"

The silence from below was mocking in its emptiness. Chuck opened his mouth to call again and saved his breath as his eyes switched to meet Big Killigan's.

"SO ED BURSON was the rat who sold me out before, eh. . ." Then Big set the example by going into action. This was no time for bitter recrimination. As he barked at Chuck to shut the door into the celler, he was already shoving over the big table to ram it against it as a barrier. They piled stuff on the table and then braced a chair between its back edge and the rear wall of the room. Still there was no volley of gunfire from the outside.

Killigan hustled to a side window, then to a forward one to check, thumbing fresh shells into the second

weapon from his shoulder rig. From upstairs there was a startled oath from Jo-Jo Garland. Right atop it came the sounds of a struggle as men grappled.

"What's the matt—" Big started to call. A furious blast of lead into the four sides of the place wiped out his words. One of the shutters sagged outward as its upper hinge was smashed. Then from upstairs came the crash of a bullet, the report like reverberating thunder as it was pent in by the confines of a room.

"Big! Big! The outside stairs—they're on it!" Jo-Jo cried down, his voice harsh and thin with pain. "Big—"

Killigan was already hurtling up the stairs as the night exploded with gunfire. Jo-Jo's gun slashed muzzle flame from a doorway toward the rear before he ducked back inside the room. "Look out, Big!" he yelled.

The outlaw flung himself prone on the second floor hall planking just in time. Lead whined over him. To his left, inside the room, was Jo-Jo hobbling on one leg, the other wounded. Behind his one-time pard, sprawled in the moonlight from a window, was the body of one of Owslow's outfit. Ahead, down the hall, a man crouched in the doorway giving onto the outside stairway. His gun winked brightly again.

Big came up, triggering as he closed on the attacker. His left gun recoiled in his hand the second time and the man tottered back from sight. Big was vaguely aware of Jo-Jo's shout of warning again. As the outlaw half turned, he saw the figure, another Owslow gunny, stepping from the doorway of a side room he had just passed. Big couldn't have swivelled his hoglegs around in time. Then—there was no need to.

Firing from one knee, the dependable Jo-Jo drilled a hole in the side of the man's head, and Big rushed on to try to head off the sally up the outside stairs. But as he stepped into the back room, lead rained around him, sending plaster spattering from the wall in dozens of places. Part of the pack out on the ground were storming slugs through the stair door and the nearby window. To advance would be as good as digging a man's own grave.

HE REALIZED at once they were covering others working up the stairs to make a rush. If he gave them time to get set, they would come pouring in, too fast and too many for him. His eyes scoured the dim room for a piece of furniture to thrust into the open doorway. Vaguely he was aware that the woman, Sally Murdee, must have slipped out and gone over to the enemy too,. He weighed the advantages of retreating, closing the door of the room, and awaiting them in the hall.

But if they once got inside the crossroads inn, it would only be a matter of time before the inevitable outcome. In a cold impersonal way, Big Killigan guessed that his time to die had come. He had to meet them at the doorway or—Dropping to hands and knees and forearms, he began to work forward with the slugs whistling just over him. He wished the shadows on the floor were thicker.

Beyond the sill of the doorway, he made out jumbled shadows. They were pressing up the stairway all right. Another few feet, another moment or two, and Killigan would have to rise and breast the leaden hail in the attempt to repulse them. He came to his knees, arming off his sombrero. Got one foot under him, cocked guns ready. Then he flung up and forward and around the edge of the door frame. And no lead from the ground below plowed into his tensed frame.

Instead, from directly above his head, twin livid lances of gun flame arrowed down at the gunmen in the brush at the edge of the yard. Two men down there howled with pain. Another went bounding like a jackrabbit across a moonlit patch toward a shed, clutching at his side. It was Jo-Jo Garland up on that roof, bellowing oaths as he rode those triggers over the edge from a prone position. Somehow, despite his injured leg, he had dragged himself up the ladder to the trap door and out on top.

Big Killigan thrust out the door onto the stairs as he realized he had far more than a hopeless prayer now. He slammed lead into the shoulder of one man a step from the top, missed a second but leaned forward to batter him down and sent him tumbling groundward with a slash of his gun barrel. A flying chunk of wood from the railing smacked the outlaw across the eyes, blinding him a moment. When his senses cleared, it was to feel a slug whistle an inch from his cheek and to see a bull of man charging up at him.

Big triggered his left gun. The hammer pinged on an empty shell. He flung it and missed. With the same hand, he lashed out. His rock-stiffened him in his tracks. Lowering his head, the outlaw charged forward on the small platform at the head of the stairs and butted the hombre full in the chest. The latter left his feet to go hurtling backward down the stairs and crash down two others who were trying to get up.

There was a heap of bellowing from around in the front. Then a man in the saddle came busting past the side of the cantina, yelling the warning. The rest of Killigan's bunch had come down the trail.

At the head of the stairs, Killigan himself glimpsed the bald head of Owslow, his old enemy, as he ducked into a stand of cottonwoods. But Big didn't even try a shot at him. For some time now, he had been belly-sick of gunplay, of any life that called for it. He spat drily as he watched Owslow's raiders flee back to the trees and hit the saddle leather to pull out. Under the moon, up at the head of the column as they hit over a rise he picked out the red head of the woman, Sally. . .

THEY had brought Jo-Jo Garland down from the roof and tied up his bullet-gouged leg in the barroom. Everybody was having a drink. Big raised his glass to Jo-Jo. "Somehow, pard, I always should uh knowed *ycu'd* stick by me! I won't forgit this." A squat bow-legged gent with merry eyes came over. "Jo-Jo, shake hands with Tuss Young. He usually operates down in the Mogollones. This is really his bunch—not mine."

Jo-Jo shook hands with Tuss Young, a man wanted in three states and who, they said, would still look happy when they fitted him for a hempen necktie. "Howdy, Garland. . Big mentioned you more 'n once. Great gent, Big. He done a favor for one of my boys up in the Big House, so I had to pay him back somehow. . Here, lemme git you another drink just to keep the pizen outa that laig, mistuh!"

Jo-Jo looked up at Big, his old boss. "His outfit, eh. . .But I reckon you're riding with 'em, eh, Big?"

As he shook his head, Big's face grew grave. "Nope, amigo. Reckon I'd be welcome to. . .But behind bars, a gent gits time for a heap of thinking. Owslow ain't worth my wrecking my life over. . .I'm heading out to some place they don't know me and starting a new life—a straight one."

Jo-Jo's eyes crinkled up. "Big, just afore I got that letter from you—from Spike Hontell, mebbe—I bought a little outfit 'way down by Orson's Wells. On Broken Head Crick, it is. Got a coupla hundred head on it. And I been wondering who'd help me run it. Now, Big, if you was—"

Inside of a few moments, they were s h a k i n g on it and chuckling. "'Course, Jo-Jo, I'd only take wages till I'd saved enough to pay for a half share!"

"Consider your half paid an' over, Big!"

"What do you mean? And, say—I sure guessed wrong," Big went on more soberly. "It was *two* of 'em—not just one—who sold me out that time. Sally *and* Ed Burson, by grab! I—"

Jo-Jo shook his head. "Neither of 'em, Big. . .That—that's what I mean by your half of the cow outfit being more 'n paid for."

"Make sense, Jo-Jo!"

"'Member when you was sparking Sally in Selby that time—they was a cousin uh hers working at that same honky tonk. Sue, by name. A little blonde filly. I—I reckon, Big, I went sorta locoed over her. She said she'd

(Continued On Page 112)

SIDEWINDER TRAIL

By Archie Joscelyn

Van der Groot found a wolf-killing job on his hands when he came home.

THE BLUE-GREEN waves of the timber came flowing down the slope here, broke two hundred yards back from the lake, where Deadman's Creek crept out, then dashed for the safety of the lake, as though fearful of pursuit. Van der Groot paused at the edge of the spruce, more from cautious force of habit than any premonition of danger. And then it came.

Rising, ghostily, full of untamed savagery—the howl of a wolf. But Van der Groot felt his flesh creep at the sound of it, for this was the death-howl. He had heard it too many times before to be mistaken. He took a swift step forward, and saw the cabin, there below the clump of spruce which seemed to hover protectingly above it. The door stood open, hanging wildly askew by one hinge. Cold sweat started on Van's tight-clenched hands.

He was hurrying now, the breath sobbing in his throat, as the wolf-howl rose and fluted and died to sudden silence, and he saw a skulking ghostly shape flit away into the shadow of the trees. A moment later he reached the spot and stood, staring blindly down at the thing lying sprawled there, above which the wolf had been howling—a dead man. His partner, Pierre.

The happiness of homecoming, which had buoyed Van der Groot up for two days and nights, went out of him in a little sigh. He had been counting on the surprise in Pierre's face, the hearty grip of his calloused hand, all the joy of reunion after the two months he had just spent in a city hospital. Not many partners could have contrived to pack a big, helpless hulk such as he had been, following that accident, and get them fifty miles to help. But Pierre was an unusual partner.

Dropping on his knees, Van der Groot looked around in a stony, terrible silence. The evidence was plain to see. Pierre had been murdered. Before that, he had been tortured. The cold sweat popped again on the big man's face as he read the story, saw two sets of tracks where the killers had carried the body this far away from the cabin and flung it out for the wolves to find, like so much carrion.

Tenderly, tears running unheeded down his cheeks now, Van der Groot lifted his friend in his arms, as though he had been a baby, carried him back to the cabin. This was late afternoon, and the little lake shimmered coldly in the thin November sunlight, the big pine, sentinel-like on the opposite shore, was as it had stood for half a century. The killers had been gone for hours, for the sign was cold. And the wolf had come, attracted by the odor of death, as evening began to creep.

THE CABIN looked as if a tornado had twisted through its interior. Lying among the wreckage, and for a moment Van knit his brows at this, was a brown, quart beer bottle, empty.

The stove was full of ashes, the

poker lay on the floor where it had been tossed after being heated red-hot, not once but several times. Already, Van der Groot had seen the brutal work of it. But it seemed all too apparent that, tortured though he had been, Pierre had refused to reveal the secret of where their gold was hidden—gold which the two of them had washed from Deadman's Creek all through the spring and summer, which Pierre had kept at even after Van had been in the hospital.

The certainty of this failure on the part of the killers showed everywhere, not alone in the wrecked cabin and final, brutal murder of their victim, but outside as well. Their rocker, off at the creek, had been pried crazily apart, then smashed to bits with the strokes of an axe.

All of that had happened during the previous afternoon and night, with final tragedy striking in the dawn. Which meant that the killers, whether or not they had found the cache of gold, had had all of this day in which to escape. The sign showed that they had headed off toward the north, into the fastnesses of the forest. If only he had returned a day earlier!

There were certain things to be done, which took the rest of the evening. A grave to dig. The rough headstone could wait. Pierre would understand. First his killers must be brought to justice. When the moon arose, Van der Groot took up the trail—a big man, who moved with the easy grace of a moose, and something of the cold, relentless ferocity of a wolf on the game trail.

It was easy for him to tell two things, as the miles fell behind. The first was that this pair were tenderfeet, in such country as this. They knew little about woodcraft, or about hiding their trail. The second fact was as clearly evident, that they did not fear or expect pursuit. Winter was close at hand, heavy snows could be expected to blot away all signs at any day now. Yet, while plainly not apprehensive insofar as the killing of Pierre was concerned, they still seemed to be fleeing from something.

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DESPITE his long day on the trail, and his new release from the hospital, Van clung doggedly to the sign until the moon went down. With sun-up he was on the scent again. On the second day, he knew that he was gaining on them. Few men could follow such a pace as he set.

On the afternoon of the third day he sighted them, just a glimpse in a little valley ahead—two hurrying figures, being swallowed again by the forest beyond. Van der Groot increased his own speed, eyeing the roll of the landscape, making his plans. He circled gradually, and finally knew that, as he had planned it, he was ahead of them.

A rearing, snow-capped mountain stood sentinel-like, less than a mile away, a landmark which he had seen the previous morning. The pair of them had used it, apparently, to insure going in a straight line. Van der Groot stepped out suddenly from the cover of a patch of brush, to confront them with leveled revolver.

He saw the sudden terror which leaped to their faces at sight of him, mingled with surprise. For a moment they acted bewildered, as though he had played a trick on them.

"Put up your hands," Van ordered. "I'm Pierre's partner—and you killed him."

The implied threat in that seemed to unnerve them even more. They had figured Pierre for a lone prospector, had been certain that no one would pass that way again before the following spring. They offered no resistance as he disarmed them.

One was a big man, with an unkempt growth of reddish beard and the shambling look of a hungry grizzly. The other man was tall, thin, dyspeptic looking. Both of them bore the stamp of men who had spent a lot of time behind prison walls. There was still a faint pallor to their skins, as though they had not been out in the open long enough for sun and wind to complete their work.

"W-what do you mean?" the big man demanded, none the less raising his hands. "We don't know no Pierre. Do we, Trake?"

(Continued On Page 86)

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Complete Cowboy

(Continued From Page 84)

"Sure don't, Nard. You must be barkin' up the wrong stump, feller."

"I tracked you here," Van retorted simply. His eyes clouded. "You murdered him, and before that, you tortured him. I'm going to see you hang, for that."

They stared at him, and there was fear in their eyes now. They looked around swiftly, furtively, as if hoping for a way of escape, but saw none. Nard licked thick lips with a trembling tongue.

"You're crazy. We ain't done nothin'." His voice rose shrilly. "We don't know what you're talkin' about."

"You'll find out," Van growled. "For I'm takin' you back. You can tell what you don't know to the law. It'll be right interestin', I bet."

"But you can't do that," Trake protested. "You ain't no sheriff, and you got no right—"

"Pierre was my pard, I tell you," Van growled impatiently. "And that gives me all the right I need. I'm takin' you back. And I got plenty of evidence to get you hung, don't worry none about that."

HE MADE camp, a little way off, and tied the two up, then cooked supper from their provisions, noting bitterly that most of their supplies had come from the cabin, from Pierre's and his own looted larder. But though he made a careful search, there was no sign of the gold which had been washed that spring and summer. Pierre had not told them, and finally, in disgust and desperation, they had killed him, made a frantic and ineffectual search, then gone on.

Slow rage smouldering in him, he fed them, then tied them to separate trees. He intended to get a good sleep tonight, and that was the only safe way. So far as their crimes were concerned, they would answer to the law, not to him. But, remembering the mutilated body of Pierre, the wolf howling above it, his jaw set hard. They'd spend an uncomfortable enough night, this way, but they had it coming.

Rolled in his own blankets, Van slept. He awoke to a deadly sense of

danger, to a smothering weight upon him, and tried to fight back, to grab for his gun. Something smashed slantwise across his skull, the night and the weight became overpowering, and he sank back into just such a pit as when the doctor at the hospital had given him chloroform.

Slowly, conscious of an aching head, Van der Groot awakened, strove to sit up, and discovered that he was tied hand and foot. The darkness still held, but it was giving way to dawn—a chill gray dawn with the threat of storm in it, and lowering, overcast sky. A wind moaned out of the northwest, and he was stiff and cramped with cold.

From the feel of his head, Van knew that he had taken a hard rap on it, that he had been unconscious for quite a while. They had taken his blanket, and now a little fire was burning not far off, men were stirring around it, starting to get breakfast. The aroma of coffee and bacon came to his nostrils.

For a few moments, the big man lay there, trying to think. How had they managed to get loose and turn the tables on him? It seemed incredible, the way he had left them tied. Then, as the light grew, he saw not two, but three men, and understanding came to him.

"Thought you was pretty smart, didn't you?" Nard chuckled throatily, seeing that he was awake. "Well, since it won't do you no harm to know, I'll tell you that Shadow here, came along durin' the night, like we'd been hopin' he would. And give you a dose of yore own medicine. I hope you like it."

Van understood now. Shadow was a little man, only about five feet high, with a scarred and twisted face. And it was only too plain that these three had broken jail, not so long before. This big mountain beyond had been a rendezvous, but they had separated, to throw off pursuit. The two had come upon the cabin and Pierre, had stopped long enough to torture him in an effort to find the gold, but had kept coming to keep their meeting. And they had been hopeful that the Shadow would show up.

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THAT was just plain bad luck, and it was soon evident to Van, listening to them, that the three of them completed the party. Now, eating, but not offering him any breakfast, they were arguing as to what to do with him. Shadow was in favor of keeping him alive, since he had proclaimed himself as Pierre's partner, and going back, making him show them where the gold was.

But the other two overrode that idea.

"That hombre we killed kept insistin' they didn't have any gold left," Trake growled. "Said it hadn't panned out. Mebby he was tellin' the truth. Anyway, we worked on him, plenty—and we looked everything over. No chance of findin' things. And it looks like a storm. I want to get on across the mountains, where we'll be safe. I'm not going back."

Nard voted with him on that. Listening, Van der Groot felt any faint hope of escape fade. For the next question was what should be done with him. Nard suggested filling him full of lead, but Shadow shook his head.

"Too crude. Way it looks to me, you chumps botched things up plenty already, killin' that other hombre. Then leavin' him for this feller to find. We don't want no more signs of murder left around. Got to just make him disappear."

"Hell," said Trake. "When the snow gets here, and the wolves—he'll disappear, fast enough."

"That's what you thought, before. I still think there must be gold there, and if'n he was that dead hombre's pard, we ought to go back. You know where that gold was, hombre? Tell us where to find it and you can go on livin'."

"I was his pardner," Van agreed. "But the reason you didn't find me there, was that I been in a hospital all summer. I got all stove up. If he had any gold dug out, which I doubt, then you must have give him some warnin', so that he got suspicious, and managed to hide it before you got to him."

"Mebby he was suspicious, at that," Nard conceded. "We hung around

(Continued On Page 90)

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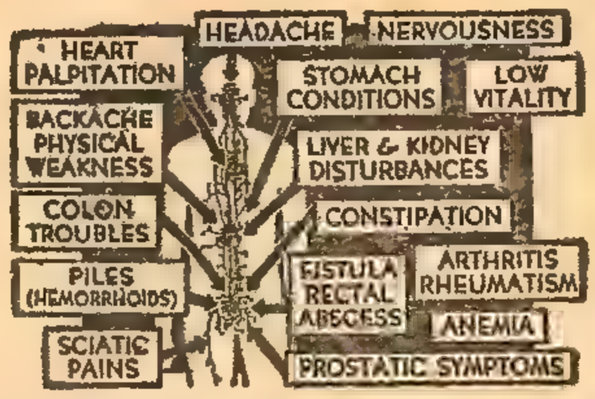

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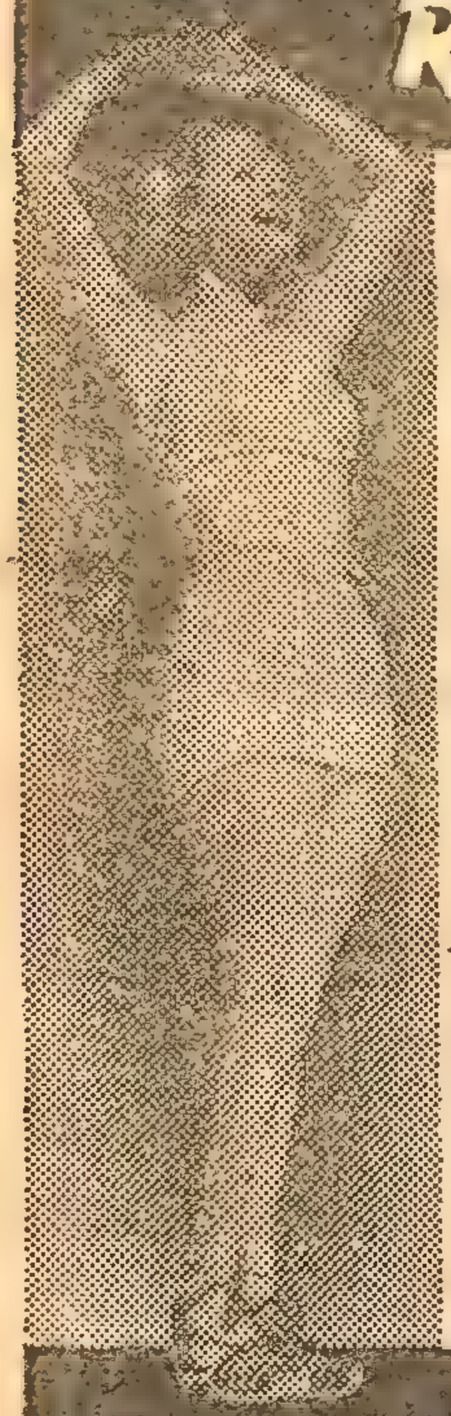

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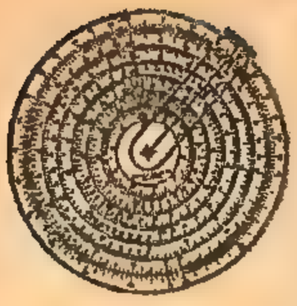

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(Continued From Page 88)

and watched him from about noon to late in the afternoon, just to make sure he was alone. But he couldn't have hid nothin', even if he had guessed. All he done was to take his boat and go out fishin' in that little lake. Took along sev'ral bottles of beer and stayed out till he'd killed them, then come back. And we grabbed him, soon as he landed."

"Well, you two sure mugged it up," Shadow said disgustedly. "Now we got to get rid of this hombre and hit the trail, since you got cold feet."

"If you want him out of the way, how about usin' that cave, up there?" Nard suggested. "Might be we could check him back in there, out of sight. There wouldn't nobody ever find him there."

He indicated a small opening in the side of the nearby bluff, about twenty feet up. A creek ran close at hand here as well, with a deep, cold-looking pool. The cave, up above, with the November wind whistling past, looked equally cheerless.

"Cave, eh? Might be an idea," Shadow grunted, his tone indicating that he doubted it. He was clearly the leader of the trio. "Let's take a look."

"Cut him loose and bring him along," Trake growled, and Nard slashed the bonds which bound Van, jerked him roughly to his feet. Staggering, scarcely able to stand, Van was herded along, and they climbed up for a look. Murder was a business, to them. The only difference was in the crudity of their methods.

THE CAVE wasn't big. The opening was a dozen feet wide, by four or five high, and the hole extended back inside the hill to the size of a small room, but there was nothing else to recommend it. Shadow shook his head decisively.

"I was hopin' there'd be a hole or crack, to drop him out of sight in," he said. "But it won't do." He glared at Van as though this had all been his fault, lips curled back in a snarl. "I got it. We'll tie his hands and feet again, anchor a big rock to him, or, better'n that, two rocks, and dump him in that deep hole in the creek."

Van's blood chilled at this. The sky had grown overcast, a chill wind had sprung up, and he knew that the temperature must be dropping rapidly toward the zero mark. A thin skim of ice was starting to form on the pond, the water looked coldly dark.

"Tie his hands behind his back," Shadow instructed. "Lay him on his face there, side of the pool. Nard, get that stone over there."

There was about an eight-foot bank here, above the water. A few flakes of snow were beginning to fall, making the day seem even more dismal. Prodded by a pair of guns, handled by the two big outlaws, there was nothing that Van could do, but as his wrists were again roped behind his back, he tensed, ready for any possible chance to make a fight of it. But they didn't intend to give him even the ghost of a chance.

Nard approached, carrying a big, half-flattened stone, grunting under its weight. He dropped it with a jar beside it. That stone would weigh at least a hundred pounds. They proceeded to use part of the rope with which his wrists were already tied, to fasten the stone as well. Van waited, tense, jaw muscles stretched.

The one thing of importance which these three didn't know was that, a few years before, he had served a term as a deputy sheriff. And a prisoner had fooled him by twisting his rope-tied wrists loose, doing so with what had looked like ridiculous ease, and had escaped.

As a result of that, Van had made a study of knots and ropes, and had learned the trick of it as well. It was easy enough to get a good bit of slack and slip your hands loose, if you knew how, with ordinary knots. He had been counting on that as a last desperate resort. But Shadow was a thorough-going villain, not disposed to take any chances.

"Get another rock, and we'll tie his ankles and fasten it to them," he instructed. "And then, feller, we'll see how good a swimmer you are!"

For the moment, they were not watching him closely. Tied as he already was, they didn't think he could move. But it was now or never, Van knew. Once his legs were in similar

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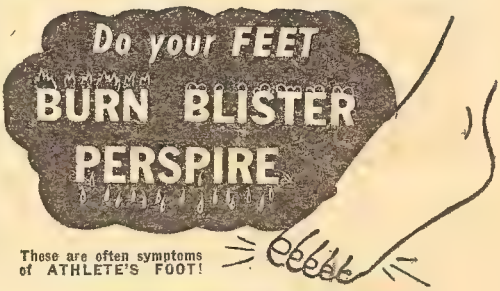

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shape, his last possible chance would be gone.

Twisting suddenly, heaving with all the strength he possessed, shoving the stone over the edge of the bank ahead of him, Van managed it. Then it was dragging him down, splitting the dark water in a tremendous splash, sinking into those icy depths, taking him with it.

Down and down for a dozen feet, into the soft bottom, from which a surge of mud rose up to fog the disturbed pool. Van had seen trappers pull up drowned beavers from such depths, and the memory was not a pleasant one. Already, he was working desperately. He had known from the feel of the rope that he could get a little slack, and he had it, but the weight of the stone was such that it was pulling against the rope, tightening the grip of it, and already his lungs felt as if they were about to burst.

STEELING himself to calmness, Van got to his feet, bending over backward, and tugged. Here in the water the weight of the stone was far less, in proportion, and he raised it a little, shoved it against the bank. Luck was with him. There was a small outward projection of the bank here, and he rested the weight of the stone on it, taking most of the strain off the rope. A moment later he had twisted his hands loose.

Gasping, he brought his nose to the surface, close up to the bank, partly hidden by overhanging brush. With his tortured lungs relieved, Van dived again, swimming in the muddied water, and came cautiously to the surface again, thirty feet downstream. They were watching at the spot where he had gone in, and, with the snow thickening in the air, they didn't see him now.

But as he stuck his head partly out, the icy breath of the wind smote him like the edge of a skinning knife, and, down under, the chill of the water was almost as bad. He had to get out of the water, and soon. But out in the open air, without a fire, it would be worse.

Van pulled himself a little higher, head and shoulders out now, cling-

(Continued On Page 94)

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(Continued From Page 92)

ing to a bush, and looked around. The three had disappeared, and for a moment he knew a thrill of hope. They must suppose him dead by now, and they'd been in a hurry to get going. If they'd go on, so that he could reach their fire, and build it up—

Then his hopes sank sharply. They had gone back to the fire, were building it up again, plainly disposed to stay there for a while. With a heavy storm setting in and the arctic cold clamping down, it was likely that they'd camp right here for days! The big man's hopes plummeted, a violent fit of shivering seized him.

That convinced him that he had to get out of the water and do something, and do it fast. Pulling himself on out, Van cast a longing glance toward the leaping blaze. It at least served one good purpose, to take most of their attention for the present. Now he had to get out of that bitter wind. The cave! That was it. If he could hide in there for a little while, and watch his chance—

Circling, moving as fast as he could, while the cold bit at him and his muscles seemed leaden, he reached the opening, and was just ducking inside the shelter of the cave when a yell testified that he had been seen, at the last moment. Trake was staring up at the opening, his face gone as white as the driving snow.

"I--I saw him, goin' in there," he chattered, in response to Shadow's sharp question. "I saw him—or his ghost—"

"Saw what, you fool? Where?" Shadow demanded harshly.

"Him! The hombre we dumped in the creek. Going into that cave!"

"You blithering fool!" Contempt was sharp as the bite of the blizzard wind, in the little man's voice. "How could—"

Shadow broke off abruptly, taking a few steps, his eyes narrowing like those of a hunting hawk. His voice changed.

"Maybe you did see something, at that," he grated. "There are wet mars here—though how in blazes he could ever have gotten out of there, I don't see. We've got to get him!"

Nard drew back, staring up at the cave, eyes dilating.

"I ain't honin' to have him get his hand on *me*," he said meaningly. "He—he's a devil, that's what he is!"

"He ain't got no gun, and he'll be soaked and freezin' in the bargain," Shadow pointed out impatiently.

"Yeah, but there's loose stones in there, that he can drop on our heads if we try to climb up and get at him," Nard pointed out, added cunningly. "Besides, you didn't want no bullet holes in him when he's mebby found sometime, did you? We can stay here by the fire and keep warm. Just leave him there to freeze. He'll do it, soon enough, soakin' wet like you say. And if he tries comin' out of there, we can shoot him then."

"For once, you show some brains, even if you are yellah," Shadow conceded grudgingly. "We'll do just that."

INSIDE the cave, shivering, Van listened grimly. This part wasn't working out at all as he had hoped

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for. If Trake hadn't seen him, at that last moment, he might have had a chance to do something. Now they intended to keep watch and leave him to freeze. Even in here out of the wind, his clothes were fast stiffening, the moan of the wind and rising storm was like a funeral dirge.

He had been given a poor look inside this cave before, and he thought, in that glance, that there might be a way out near the back, a hole through which he might perhaps crawl, which would give him a chance to circle around and take them by surprise. But it was only a small hole, fit for mountain rats, hopeless for him.

Their fire was leaping high now, as they piled more fuel on it from an old pile of driftwood by the creek bank, and sight of it, of the three hovering over it, was maddening. He'd have to do something fast, if at all. But what?

An idea came to him. Working with stiffening fingers, Van pulled off his pants. Soaked as he was, they offered little protection anyway, were freezing, stiff enough to stand alone. He slid the legs outside, below the cave mouth, fastening them in place with a stone. Watching narrowly, for a moment when all three outlaws were looking somewhere else, Van flung a stone, saw them look that way as they heard it strike, then he dropped to the ground below the cave.

A few steps carried him to the shelter of a clump of willows. The blizzard was thickening now, rendering objects hazy a few feet away. Nard, turning to look back, gave a startled yell and then began running toward the cave, where it looked as if a man was getting ready to drop to the ground. His course was taking him past where Van crouched.

As Nard shambled past, Van reached out, whipping his stiffening coat over Nard's face, jerking, dropping him in a terrified tangle. When he straightened, Nard's revolver was in his hand.

Trake too, had started toward the cave. Only Shadow had remained by the fire, suspicious and wary, and now, as Van swung around, Shadow's

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gun was out and spitting lead at him. And the little outlaw was warm and dry, there beside the fire, while Van's hand was stiffening with the cold.

The ice of the pool seemed to be in his body now, running in his veins where blood should be pumping. More than anything else, he had to get to the fire. Advancing at a crazy, staggering run, Van managed to hold the revolver, to trigger back. He heard the errie whistle of bullets, moaning like the rising howl of the wind.

Terror leapt into Shadow's eyes as the big man kept coming. The fear that had been in Nard was communicating itself to him, that this was something more than a man. The outlaw's gun hammer snapped on an empty shell, and with a banshee howl, Shadow turned to flee—too late. Van reached him, lunged down with the pistol barrel. It left a glancing streak of red down the side of the convict's head, and he slumped, almost tumbling into the fire.

They had piled on a lot of wood, fanned by the wind, it was burning hotly now. The searing heat of it beat gratefully at Van, but he hardly felt it as he turned, looking for Trake. But Trake had stumbled and lost his gun, was fumbling desperately for it now among the layer of old leaves and new snow which covered the ground. As he saw the big man advancing on him, he screamed, raising his hands, his face chalky.

"You ain't human!" he shrieked. "And nobody can fight a devil!"

Nard too, free of the cumbering coat, disarmed, was coming back to the fire passively enough, at Van's command. Becoming aware that his hair was beginning to singe, Van stepped back slightly, gesturing with the gun.

"Take off your clothes, Nard," he ordered. "I'll put 'em on. And when we're dry, we'll be going back."

SOME days later, back at the wrecked cabin, Van left his prisoners, a cowed and chastened trio now, tied, while he hunted up the old row boat which he and Pierre used on rare occasions, and which, according to the two, Pierre had used for that last fishing trip. The blizzard had passed, and, down here, there was almost a last breath of Indian summer in the air again.

"Where did he do most of his fishing, that afternoon?" Nard demanded, and his eyes, as they ranged to the ruined cabin and back to Pierre's grave, made the three outlaws shiver.

"Off across there, close by that big pine," Nard explained hastily.

It was sunny, but the water of the lake was icy. Kindling a good fire on the shore, Van undressed, rowed out, and peered down into the depths. The bottom, ten feet below, was sandy, and he could see several quart beer bottles, the dark glass shimmering in the reflected light. He dove, and brought them up, one at a time, then rowed to the shore, hurried to the fire and dressed again. Returning to his goggle-eyed prisoners, Van pulled out a cork, to disclose a bottle full of dust and nuggets.

"It's a cinch that Pierre spotted you hangin' around that day, and decided he'd better take precautions—though evidently he didn't figger on havin' to deal with such cold-blooded killers," Van said grimly. "As it was, he fooled you on the gold, like he aimed to. Half of this belongs to me. The other half goes to Pierre's niece."

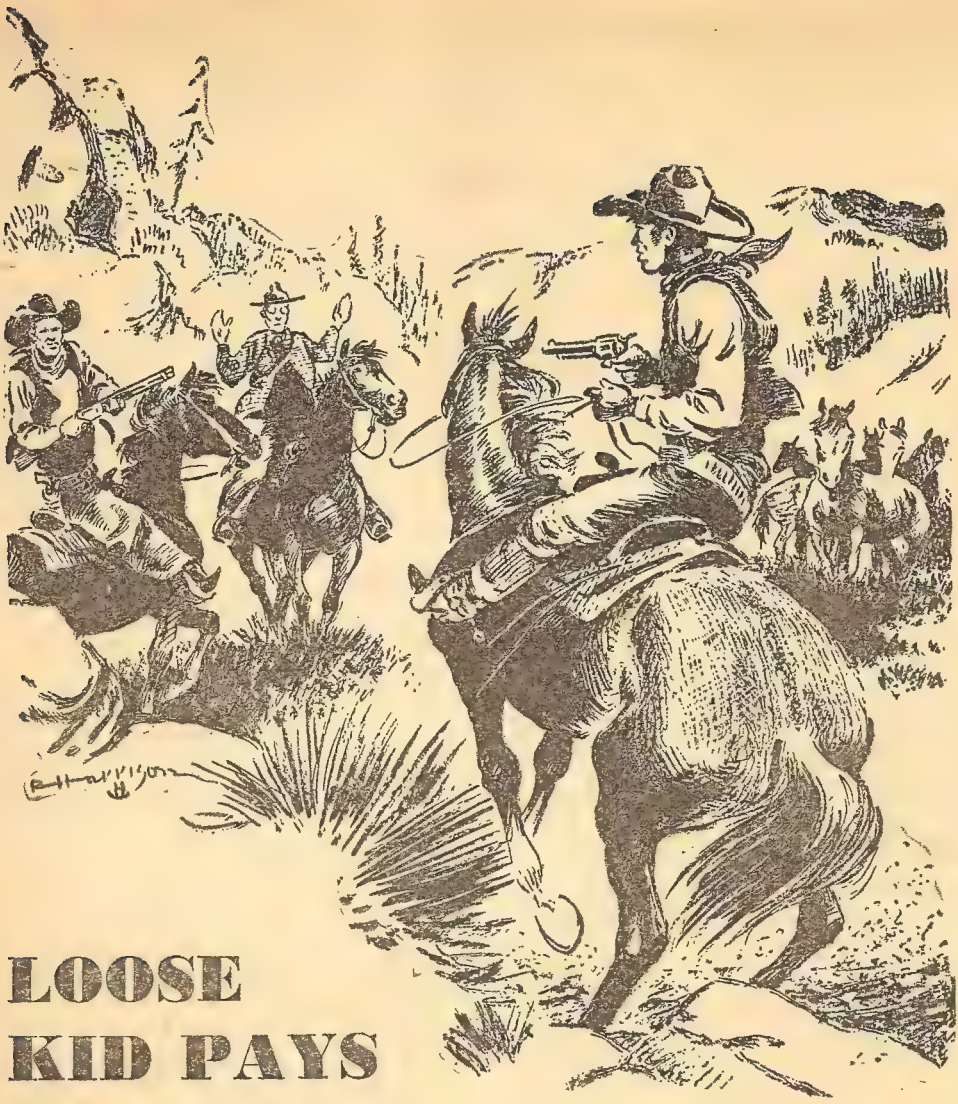
The trio were staring, non-plussed. A little of the terror that had gripped them back at the cave was in his voice again, as he voiced their doubt.

"You *must* be a devil," he said. "You wasn't here to see him do that—and we watched him hide it, and was fooled. How'd you ever figure it out?"

Van chuckled, for the first time in days, grimly.

"Easy," he said. "Them bottles of beer belonged to me. Pierre never drank a drop in his life. Wouldn't touch the stuff. So, if he went fishin' with sev'ral bottles of beer—you put beer and fish together, and you get gold—and a noose for sidewinders!"

'THE END)



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"But I heard them Big Mike—I mean Mr. Danman—I heard them talkin' of takin' over your herd," the thin-faced youngster said firmly. "I was sleepin' under the ledge of a gulley when I heard these rustlers on top of the gulley point out just what cattle they were bent on rustlin' tonight." The boy's face was tense and far too old for his fourteen years.

Mike Danman rolled a quirly in thick fingers and moved his heavy bulk in the chair. The chair creaked protestingly.

"I believe they call you, Loose Kid, don't they"; he said impressively. "I've seen you around."

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Complete Cowboy

A brief flicker of surprise crossed the youngster's face. Who hadn't seen him around? Who in Bennett didn't know him as a homeless waif who uncomplimentarily was referred to as Loose Kid? It was a distasteful name, which is probably what the townspeople intended it should be. It was an affront and a stigma all rolled into two words.

Danman abruptly leaned forward and pointed his cigarette at the youngster. "You should be the last person—the very last—to make such an accusation. After all your—er—background isn't so good. Nobody should believe you, especially when you mention cattle rustling."

The Loose Kid's throat bulged and he seemed to swallow a hard knot that came from the very heart itself.

Danman's meaning was only too painfully clear. It had been four years since the kid, from a distance, had seen a posse that included Big Mike Danman, hold a lynching bee that had left the kid's father and three other confessed rustlers swinging grotesquely from the limb of a cottonwood tree.

The kid had remained in Bennett for no other reason save that in his heart he felt assured that some member of his family would be able to clear the name of Loose. It had not been easy, taking whatever odd jobs a kid could fill, sleeping and eating as best he could, and trying to stare down the unspoken taunts so near the surface in the hard glances tossed his way.

He was not large enough for a regular cowpoke job, and lacked a saddle to call his own. And if he had been in the market for regular employment it would have been necessary to see Big Mike Danman, who owned and operated the largest cooperative ranch on the whole of the mesa.

Now he had told Big Mike that the choicest lot of his and other ranchers' steers on Big Mike's ranch was to be rustled.

And Big Mike did not believe him—simply because his name was Loose and his father had been caught throwing a long loop. Just why the

whole town should think he was cut from the same stripe as his Dad, and just a natural nominee for a noose, was hard to understand.

BIG MIKE was watching the kid intently.

"Of course if there was some rustling on my spread," Big Mike growled, "it would have to be somebody who knew the layout—like some former employee—like Chuck Reynolds."

The kid clutched his battered hat in his hands and found himself twisting the hat into a corded rope.

"Why Chuck wouldn't do a thing like that," the kid said hoarsely. "He's doing all right on that little spread he bought for himself. He wasn't among the men I heard talking."

"Hum-m," Big Mike said, writing rapidly, "that may be so. For a guy who is hardly better than a squatter Chuck Reynolds is coming up mighty fast. Yes—mighty fast."

The kid knew this was not so. In all of the mesa he could depend only upon one man—and that man was Chuck Reynolds. When matters became too tough—and pride permitted—the kid always was sure of a welcome at Reynolds'. He could flop on a cot and always fill his thin belly until pride drove him into the hills or the town again. He never stayed long. He couldn't impose on Reynolds, for Reynolds had so little. An extra mouth to feed, in Reynolds' condition, was a hardship. Of that the kid was sure.

"Big Mike," the kid said in a sudden fury of utter futility, "you're as wrong as a nine dollar bill!" He turned abruptly on his heel and started for the door of the land office.

"Hold on there, younker," Big Mike said, and he was on his feet and smiling. "My foreman is up at the saloon. Give him this note. You're working for me now. He'll fix you up."

The kid suddenly was wary. The hairs on the nape of his neck crawled ominously.

"Why?" The kid asked in sus-

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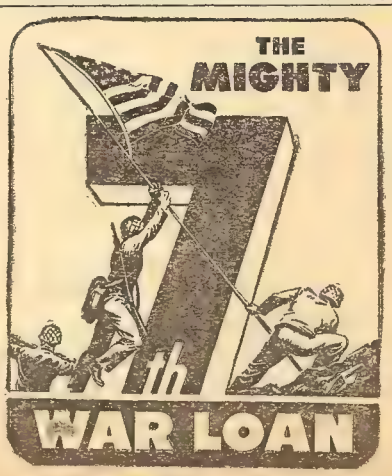

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picion. A cowpoke without a saddle—and only fourteen—usually was not taken on—especially by a tight-fisted man like Big Mike.

Big Mike laid a fatherly hand on the kid's shoulder. "Because you've got spunk, Loose Kid. You're growing up. You'll make a good hand—and I need good hands."

The kid hesitated, then shrugged. After all, a job was a job—and he had to make a start sometime. And being on the ranch when the blowoff came—a blowoff Big Mike refused to believe—would offer protection for an innocent man like Chuck Reynolds. The kid meant to find out for himself the identity of the rustlers. All he knew so far was that he could identify their voices.

"Well," the kid said hesitantly. "Well—just thanks—that's all—thanks." He took and pocketed the proferred letter.

Big Mike chuckled good-naturedly.

AT THE Last Dollar Saloon the kid pushed importantly through the swinging doors.

"Get the hell outta here," the bartender bellowed. "We ain't got no work and there's no free grub."

The kid winced inwardly, but continued to walk rapidly across the sawdust-covered floor. After all, wasn't he a man with a job now and entitled to go into and do what he so desired? He was, he told himself, and strode up to Kennedy, the ranch foreman.

"For you," he said, and passed over Big Mike's letter.

Kennedy, bristly-faced and florid, took one look at the letter, reached hastily for the quart of redeyed, and downed a neat three-fingers worth.

"Hell!" he said. Then, "Hell and damnation!"

"I didn't ask him for the job," the kid said.

Kennedy turned slowly and looked down at the Loose Kid. It came to the kid like something in a nightmare that he had seen Kennedy stand stock still before—only he had been looking up and grinning at a slowly-turning body hanging from a taut rope.

(Continued On Page 102)

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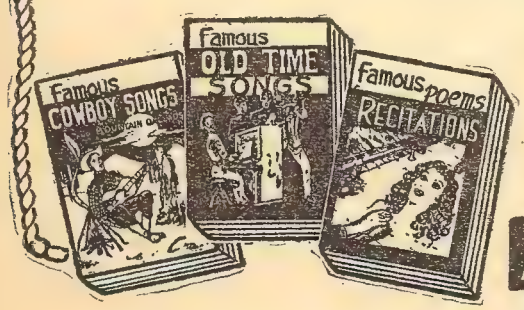

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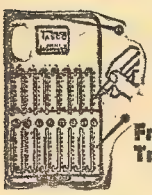

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(Continued From Page 100)

"The job part is okay, kid," he said. "I was just cussin' because the boss wants us to go back now. And we still had about four more hours to take on some likker."

That did not ring true, either. It was not payday and Kennedy and his men should have been out on the range. But the kid shrugged and decided to play his string out. After all, when you have nothing there's nothing you can lose. . . .

Kennedy took the kid's arm and led him to the back room. When he opened the door and gently pushed the kid inside four men looked up and the kid saw the snout of a six-shooter braced along the edge of the round table.

The first thought that came to the kid was that these were not local men, and he would have known of any strangers working for Big Mike.

"What's this," a cowpoke said hoarsely. "We don't need no kids around."

"That's right," another said deep in his chest. "What's ailin' yuh, Kennedy?"

Cold fear engulfed the kid. He couldn't be mistaken about those voices. Under the protective covering of the ledge at the gulley he had heard these same voices. There was no possibility of mistake.

He heard Kennedy shut the door, and whirled.

Kennedy was smiling down upon him.

The kid started to say, "Now lookit here, Kennedy, I—" when he heard the vague hissing of slashed air. He tried to turn and duck low. Dimly he saw the glint of a downsweeping six-shooter. Then the world exploded and he felt his knees lurch up and out from under him. Then he knew no more.

* * *

THE PAIN was like a shocking thing as his brain fought for consciousness. Each effort was like shooting rockets that burned like branding irons.

He tried to move and could not, and then became aware of the soft-

ness of a familiar bunk beneath his body. There were familiar odors, too, that were vaguely disconcerting. He turned his head and became aware that he was in a dark cabin. An oblong window pane, frightfully small, told him just whose cabin he was in —Chuck Reynolds'.

An occasional bawling and the sudden movement of hoofs told him cattle were moving restlessly just beyond the limits of the cabin.

A fierce fear possessed him. Reynolds had a few head, but they were in pasture. The movements outside sounded like more than just a few head, like Reynolds might have driven a few strays onto his own land after darkness.

He tried to sit up and found his arms bound and the loops running beneath Reynolds' bunk.

That made it look more damning than ever for Reynolds. Where was Reynolds? And why should he tie the kid up in his own cabin? If he had wanted to make sure the kid did not see the rustling of Big Mike's herd, then Reynolds certainly had succeeded.

He lay still trying to force his spinning head into some semblance of clarity. It was hard to think coherently.

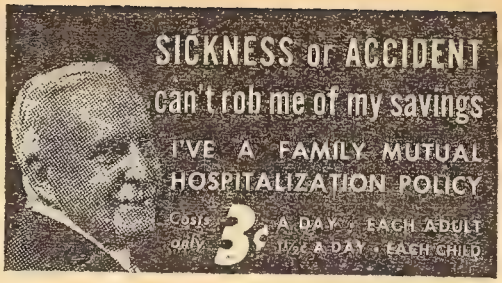
And suddenly it wasn't at all difficult anymore. Above and beyond the slow movement of cattle came the distinct sound of two shots, then a fusillade. There was a period of quiet, followed by another scattering of shots.

The kid thought he had the answer then—and ugly it was even though not a complete answer. He strained at his bonds.

With an utter feeling of surprise he felt them give—give far too easily. He knew that he had been tied with slipknots—knots never meant to hold a man for any long period.

And that didn't make sense. Or did it? Such a situation was rife in its implications—none of which seemed to be in the favor of Chuck Reynolds.

He pulled the ropes free and put his feet over the side of the bunk.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When he tried to stand his head ached intolerably.

He finally weaved upright and staggered across the cabin and pulled open the door.

There were some longhorns and a few white faces practically parked on Reynolds' doorstoop. Whoever had driven them here hadn't bothered to corral them.

The kid weaved on his feet, then returned to the cabin. When he came out he was carrying Reynolds' scattergun and the pockets of his patched pants bulged with shells.

He drove a path through the cattle to the barn, and felt hot blood start to flow again through his matted hair and then chillingly down his neck and back. He felt weak, knew his was weak, knew agonizingly that this was no time to be in either condition. He—a kid—had a big job to do; a job that a well man would have considered unsafe and unwanted.

CHUCK'S HORSE and saddle were gone. But broad and sway-backed Nellie, a chore horse for the wagon and the alfalfa patch, still munched contentedly in her stall. The kid led her outside; pulled himself up upon her back. There was no bit, just a hackamore. The kid beat a tattoo on her sides. Nellie looked up at him in surprise and started to lumber slowly for Big Mike Danham's huge spread.

The shots had come from up there. Of that the kid felt reasonably sure. What they had protended was anyone's guess.

On a sudden impulse the kid pulled on the hackamore until Nellie reluctantly turned south for an arroyo that led from Big Mike's ranch and then through Lozek Pass in the wilds of the mountains.

It was a long gamble and he realized it, but smart rustlers could not logically take any other route and remain under cover.

The kid cursed and fumed at Nellie, but the full extent of his prodding only induced Nellie to continue a jarring, slow-footed trot. Still, he reasoned, they were moving faster than a herd could be moved.

Loose Kid Pays Off

It was nearing dawn when he heard the faint bawling of cattle. Later he smelled the dust in the air, and thought he detected the jar—like a drum reverberating—of many hoofs in motion.

When it did happen it almost was too easy. The man out on point was the gun-swinging waddy who had opened the kid's skull.

He came around a bend in the canyon and there confronting him was the kid, sighting along the barrel of the scattergun and a foaming Nellie with her head low and blowing hard at the ground. Together the kid and the horse made an unimposing pair. But the gun in the kid's hands was imposing—and deadly.

"Don't reach, you hombre," the kid said, as the rider's hand moved slowly downward to his holstered gun.

The right hand came slowly upward, the left was taut on the reins.

"Come in closer," the kid clipped. "And keep that right hand up."

The rider hesitated, then walked his horse slowly forward, with only his eyes making furtive movements.

Without warning the kid jammed the muzzle into the rider's face, bringing a howl of pain. As the rider's head bent the kid reversed the gun and brought the butt down hard on the waddy's skull.

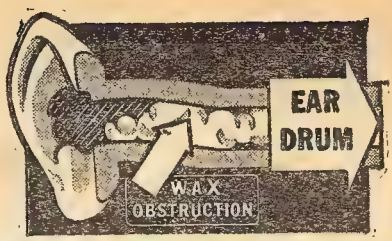
The man slipped soundlessly from his saddle and to the ground.

The kid felt his own sore scalp. "That pays us off—in part."

He hauled the man to the side of the canyon and bound him with his own lariat. Then the kid swung aboard the rider's horse, gave Nellie an affectionate rap on her rump to start her home, and turned to climb the hills of the canyon.

He pulled up behind a clump of boulders and looked down. Almost a thousand head were making the turn in the canyon—sleek, white-faced steers mostly, a huge endeavor of the cooperative ranch. The kid hazarded the guess that only a few were the actual property of Big Mike, the rest belonging to ranchers who leased his broad acres and his studs. It was a nice haul—a sweet setup.

There were two riders, "Hawing"



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at the herd, using their ropes as sharp-cracking whips. They were pushing the cattle hard.

The kid's first shot echoed and re-echoed through the canyon. It was deliberately high.

The riders pulled up and wheeled their horses uncertainly. The tail end of the herd shoved forward and tried to break into a run but were blocked off.

Behind his boulder the kid called: "Drop your guns, hombres. You're surrounded."

One rider made a desperate grab at his holster. The kid's scattergun made him pitch sideways and face down in the dust.

That convinced the second. He reached cautiously for his gun and dropped it.

The kid rode down the slope while the rider sat his sorrel in goggle-eyed amazement.

The rest was simple. The kid turned the herd with a fusillade of shots and yells. When the herd had started on its return trip to Big Mike's, the kid swung to the far side on it with his two prisoners, bound to each other atop the sorrel.

* * *

THE HANGING that morning would have been an epic one. The oldest inhabitant admitted it. When the kid on his horse and leading the laboring horse carrying the two captives turning into the square, Chuck Reynolds already was up on the scaffold, a rope around his neck.

The sheriff was on the platform, seeing to it that the knot under Reynolds' ear was secure and properly placed to snap his neck.

And Big Mike and the foreman, Kennedy, were standing before the platform looking up with a look the kid remembered. Only the other time it had not been an innocent man up there.

But Chuck Reynolds was innocent.

"We caught him bare-handed," Big Mike was telling the crowd over and over again. "He already had the cattle on his ranch when we caught up to him. When we tried to take him

(Continued On Page 108)

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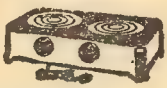

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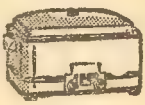

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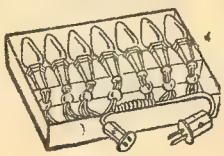

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(Continued From Page 106)

he even threw a few shots at us. The cattle are still there, as proof."

"But what about the Loose Kid," Reynolds said huskily. "You said I captured him, was holding him prisoner, because he knew of the raid on your herd? Where is he if I harmed him?"

"We have proof he was tied-up in your cabin, with loose knots so that he could escape," Kennedy spat. "It's easy to read sign."

"It shore is," the kid said from the outskirts of the crowd. He sat his horse easily, the scattergun across his knees.

"Hell and damnation," Kennedy said. "It's the kid!"

"Seize him, sheriff," Big Mike yelled. "We can have a double hanging now."

"Put down the gun, kid," the sheriff said evenly. "You got some explaining to do."

The kid pushed back his hat and said: "I reckon I have." He did not discard the gun. He was staring at Kennedy and Big Mike.

There was something in his demeanor, his utter confidence in himself, and the sight of the two prisoners trussed aboard the sorrel that was convincing.

"Say your piece," the sheriff said.

"I know from talking to these hombres," the kid said indicating his prisoners. "I guessed most of it, but they proved me right."

"He's a damned liar!" one prisoner said.

The kid reversed his gun and raised it.

The second prisoner screamed: "Don't hit me again!" Then to the sheriff and the crowd: "He's tellin' you the McCoy."

LOOKING AT the sheriff, the kid watched Big Mike and Kennedy start to draw back into the crowd.

"Reynolds is my friend," the kid said levelly. "When the rustlers found out that I knew of their raid they decided to make Reynolds the fall guy 'cause I'd be a perfect stooge for him. They drove about fifty head into his place, and he came out to find out what the rumpus was about. There

(Continued On Page 110)

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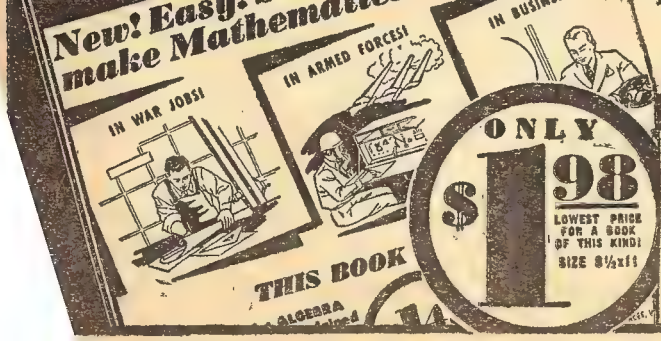

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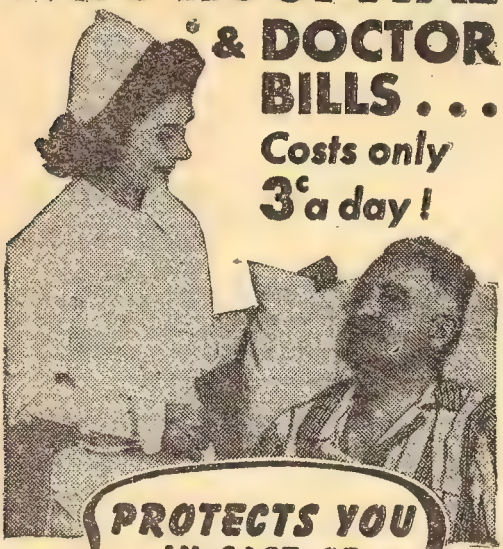

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(Continued From Page 108)

was some shooting. and Reynolds—being innocent—surrendered.

"The rustlers had slugged me. When they grabbed Reynolds they took me to his cabin and tied me up loose."

"Why?" someone in the crowd asked.

"That's easy. If I rushed out to help Reynolds, I'd been held as a rustler, too. If I'd 'a' been afraid and run for it, Reynolds would have been hung and people would have been saying of me 'He was just like his dad.' Only I didn't run for it. I went out and got the real rustlers and turned the herd back for home. They're cattle that belongs to most of you small ranchers. Big Mike naturally had to lose a few of his own to make the thing look good, but he couldn't be held responsible for the much bigger loss you small ranchers with leases with him would suffer."

"What herd?" the sheriff rasped.

"What the rustlers really were after —the big herd," the kid said, shifting his gun near his shoulder. "All this excitement over Reynolds and fifty mangy critters was just a smoke screen. You people were getting so busy trying and hanging Reynolds that the real herd was getting away."

The sheriff turned suddenly and looked hard at the spot were Big Mike had been standing.

"What have you got to say—" he started, then broke off.

The kid's gun came up to his shoulder. He saw the faces of two men looking up at a cord strung from a cottonwood tree. The gun spoke twice and two big men preparing to mount horses near the rack at the side of the jail clutched riddled shoulders. Big Mike fell blubbering to the ground. Kennedy looked contemptuously down at him, and spat.

"Your answer," the kid said. "Trying to get away would have been guilt enough, but they'll talk, and so will these two men." He motioned to his two prisoners. "Now don't you think it's about time to get that rope from around Reynolds' neck?"

The crowd roared its assent, and the sheriff raised his hand for silence after removing the rope.

(Continued On Page 112)

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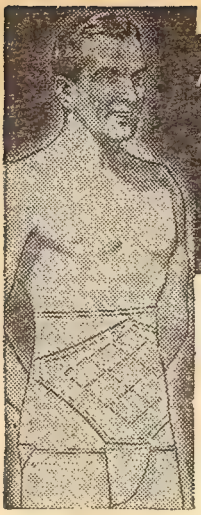

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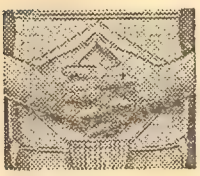

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Loose Kid Pays Off

(Continued From Page 110)

"Loose Kid," he said slowly, "I guess I ain't rightly been watching how you growed up. All of a sudden like. And we don't want any vags in this town; you gotta go to work, understand."

"Yes sir," the kid said, feeling a sudden panic.

"Like as maybe my deputy," the sheriff said, and the crowd growled assent again.

For a hero and a deputy the kid almost ruined everything by busting out crying then and there. But he didn't, knowing that the name of Loose had been cleared for all time in Bennett.

(THE END)

Outlaw's Court

(Continued From Page 81)

run off with me and git hitched if I had a coupla thousand in my jeans. I'd been drinking real hard for days, B-Big. Didn't know rightly what I was doing. And—and—hells bells, Big—drill me if ya want—but one of them badge packers carried the word to Owslow and he put up the dinero and—oh, dammit, Big, it was me who sent ya to jail!"

Big Killigan had gone stony-faced. Then, as he glanced around at the chattering men, his stern mouth eased. "Mebbe it was all for the best, Jo-Jo. . .Mebbe in jail a gent gits sense—sense enough to quit the owlhoot and settle down and work an outfit with an old pard like you! And I bet them other two was *trying* to sell me out anyways. . ."

(THE END)

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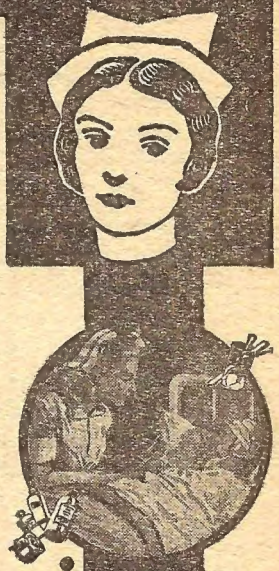

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